

UH Mānoa SP 2024 Study Abroad in Machida, Japan



J.F. OBERLIN UNIVERSITY

## ACM384 STUDY ABROAD

## THE LIFE AND FILMS OF AKIRA KUROSAWA

Instructor: GEORGE CHUN HAN WANG, Professor, ACM: School of Cinematic Arts

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Rashomon

**Course Alpha:** ACM  
**Course number:** 384  
**Credits:** 3  
**Prerequisite:** none

**Office Hours:** TBA  
**Classroom:** TBA  
**Meetings:** TBA



Akira Kurosawa, 1910-1998

## COURSE OVERVIEW

Akira Kurosawa has been called Japan's greatest film director. In the West, he remains the best-known Japanese filmmaker, and works like *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* have retained a consistent popularity both in Japan and abroad. They have, moreover, greatly influenced Western filmmaking, from genres such as the Western to directors like Sergio Leone and George Lucas.

Kurosawa's career has been a long and prolific one, and it stretches from the chaos of war-torn Japan to the present day and has ranged from contemporary films (*Rhapsody in August*) to period works (*Seven Samurai*), from works based on Japanese literature (*Sanshiro Sugata*) as well as foreign sources (*High and Low*), from exercises in established genres (*The Hidden Fortress*) to inventions of new genres (*Rashomon*). But Kurosawa's eclectic tastes are unified by his consistent concern that his works be popular, that they move and excite a large audience. This they have done, uniting a seriousness of purpose with an ability to command the affection of a mass audience.

In this class, we will examine the films of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa from the following perspectives: historical, social, cultural, political, artistic and humanistic, guiding students to a richer understanding of Japanese culture. The class will be a mixture of lecture and discussion and screenings of films and select video clips. All Kurosawa films screened are in English subtitles.

## STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course, students will:

1. Become familiar with the major works of Akira Kurosawa and understand his stature as a major figure in Japanese and world cinema.
2. Understand what Kurosawa's films reveal about Japanese history, society and culture, and the historical context around the films he made.
3. Appreciated and comprehended the ways in which societies and cultures other than their own address human needs and concerns.
4. Understand the ways in which culture, race, ethnicity, gender and class affect individual and collective identities, experiences.
5. Demonstrate knowledge of diversity with a focus on Japanese cinema and its film industry.
6. Cultivate a greater interest in the extraordinary development of Japanese cinema and in national cinemas outside Hollywood.



1990 Academy Awards Lifetime Achievement Award presented to Akira Kurosawa by George Lucas and Stephen Spielberg

## REQUIRED TEXT

Wild, Peter. *Akira Kurosawa*. 2014.

ISBN: 1-78023-380-9

Available Online @ University of Hawaii Library eBook Central

## ATTENDANCE/PARTICIPATION

Every unexcused absence will impact your final grade. Attendance is taken once at the beginning of class. Not participating in discussions is a form of absence. Be prepared for classes by reading all the assigned chapters each week and complete assignments by due dates. It is your responsibility to secure any missed notes, instructions, and/or handouts from your classmates.

## ASSIGNMENTS

- **Scene Study:** You will pick a scene from a given film and, in a 3pp paper (Times New Roman 12 double-spaced), analyze the various techniques used (ex. camera movement, editing, set design, costume design, performances, writing, etc.) and how they tell the story in a uniquely Kurosawa manner.
- **Essay:**
  - You'll write a 5pp paper (Times New Roman 12 double-spaced) on any topics close-related to Akira Kurosawa and his works.
  - You can focus on analyzing and comparing various Kurosawa films, or works/filmmakers influenced by Kurosawa.
  - Your essay must reflect and address at least one of the student learning outcomes listed in page 1, particularly SLO 2, 3 & 4.
  - Your essay should express your own thoughts, original observations, or engage in your own research on various new and related topics not/less-covered in class.
  - Support your essay with evidence, and obey basic grammar and formatting conventions.



*Seven Samurai*

- **Presentation + Q&A:** You will present your essay to the class (with visual support such as photos and film clips. You will answer questions from your instructor and classmates.
- **Final Exam:** The final exam will be a series of questions highlighting topics we've discussed throughout the semester.
- **Participation:** It is imperative that you complete the weekly assigned reading prior to the class. You are expected to come prepared for active, engaged, and meaningful discussion. Asking questions is an essential part of the learning process and you are encouraged to raise your questions during lectures, film screenings and discussions.
- **Attendance/Screenings:** Select major works of Kurosawa will be screened in this class, in shorter clips or in their entirety. Attendance for all screenings is mandatory—an important part of cinema studies is understanding it as a collective experience where you continuously gauge your emotional responses against other spectators in the room.

## GRADES

Grade Breakdown (100 points total)		
Scene Study	Due on Week 7	20 points
Essay	Due on Week 12	20 points
Presentation	Weeks 12-15	10 points
Presentation Q&A	Weeks 12-15	10 points
Final Exam	TBA	30 points
Attendance/Participation	Weeks 1-15	10 points
Visit the "Gradebook" section in Laulima for updated grading information.		

### GRADE SCALE:

A (94-100), A- (90-93),  
 B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82),  
 C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72),  
 D+ (67-69), D (63-66), D- (60-62),  
 F (0-59)

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### Week 1: *Sanshiro Sugata*

Topics for lectures and discussions	Course overview & introduction. Explanation of course assignments and expectations. Akira Kurosawa's early years, World War II and Japanese censorship.
Screening	<b><i>Sanshiro Sugata</i></b> (姿三四郎, <i>Judo Story</i> 1943)
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 1 " <i>1910-1942: Early Years</i> "

### Week 2: *Rashomon*

Topics	Kurosawa's early works. Postwar Kurosawa and the Occupation. Narrative hallmarks of <i>Rashomon</i> . International success and the beginning of the Golden age of Japanese cinema.
Screening	<b><i>Rashomon</i></b> (羅生門, 1950)
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 2 " <i>1943-1947: Early Works</i> "



*High and Low*

### Week 3: *Ikuru*

Topics	The Themes and Influence of <i>Ikuru</i> . <i>Ikuru</i> and <i>Living</i> (2022). Kurosawa's existential humanism.
Screening	<b><i>Ikuru</i></b> (生之慾, <i>To Live</i> , 1952)
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 3 " <i>1947-1949: Modern Ills</i> "

### Week 4: *Seven Samurai I*

Topics	Themes and style of <i>Seven Samurai</i> . Character development in <i>Seven Samurai</i> .
Screening	<b><i>Seven Samurai</i></b> (七人の侍, 1954) Part One
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 4 " <i>1950: World Cinema</i> "

### Week 5: *Seven Samurai II*

Topics	<i>Seven Samurai</i> and <i>The Magnificent Seven</i> (1960, 2016). Kurosawa's Portrayals of Women. Success & International Acclaims.
Screening	<b><i>Seven Samurai</i></b> (七人の侍, 1954) Part Two
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 5 " <i>1955-1957: Darkness and Disappointment</i> "



**Week 6: Hidden Fortress**

Topics	Friendship, greed, loyalty, and social classes in Kurosawa films. Elements of <i>Star Wars</i> (1977) found in <i>Hidden Fortress</i> (1958).
Screening	<b>Hidden Fortress</b> (隠し砦の三悪人, 1958)
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 6 "1955-1957: Darkness and Disappointment"

**Week 7: Yojimbo**

Topics	Sergio Leone and Akira Kurosawa. Clint Eastwood versus Toshiro Mifune. <i>Yojimbo</i> and <i>A Fistful of Dollars</i> (1964).
Screening	<b>Yojimbo</b> (用心棒, 1961)
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 7 "1958-1960: Defying Convention" <b>Assignment Due: Scene Study</b>

**Week 8: High and Low**

Topics	Kurosawa's noirs. <i>High and Low</i> and the economic miracle years of Japan. Adapting <i>King's Ransom</i> to <i>High and Low</i> .
Screening	<b>High and Low</b> (天国と地獄, 1963)
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 8 "1961-1963: No Rest"

**Week 9: Dersu Uzala**

Topics	Artistic decline? A difficult decade for Kurosawa. International Production: 18 months in the Soviet Union.
Screening	<b>Dersu Uzala</b> (デルス ウザーラ, 1975)
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 9 "1964-1973: Endings"

**Week 10: Ran I**

Topics	Two Epics: <i>Kagemusha</i> ( <i>Shadow Warrior</i> , 1980) and <i>Ran</i> (1985) Kurosawa and Shakespeare: <i>Throne of Blood</i> (1957), <i>The Bad Sleep Well</i> (1960) and <i>Ran</i> (1985).
Screening	<b>Ran</b> (乱, 1985), Part One
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 10 "1975-1985: Majestic Pageantry"

**Week 11: Ran II**

Topics	Kurosawa's last epic is a French/Japanese international co-production. Recognition of five Academy Awards nominations including best direction. Is <i>Ran</i> the finest work of Kurosawa?
Screening	<b>Ran</b> (乱, 1985), Part Two
Reading Due	Wild, Chapter 11 "1986-1998: Echoes"

**Week 12: Dreams**

Topics	<i>Dreams</i> , Kurosawa's deeply personal film. Receiving the 1990 Academy Awards Lifetime Achievement Award.
Screening	<b>Dreams</b> (ゆめ, 1990)
<b>Essay Due</b>	Presentation of Essays

**Week 13: Rhapsody in August**

Topics	A rare Kurosawa film featuring a female lead and an American star. Remembering the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and the portrayal of Japanese as victims of the Pacific War.
Screening	<b>Rhapsody in August</b> (八月の狂詩曲, 1991)
Presentation	Presentation of Essays (cont'd)



**Week 14: *Madadayo***

Topics	The 83-year-old master's farewell and a final dream sequence. Kurosawa's legacy.
Screening	<b><i>Madadayo</i></b> (まあだだよ, <i>Not Yet</i> , 1993)
Presentation	Presentation of Essays (cont'd)

**Week 15: *Course Reflections***

Topics	Kurosawa's influences. Course reflections. All remaining work due today.
Screening	Clips from various interviews and documentaries.
Presentation	Presentation of Essays (cont'd)

**Mature Content Warning:** Some of the films screened in this course may contain sexually explicit, violent, sensitive, upsetting, triggering and/or disturbing material, all of which will be discussed in an intellectually responsible manner. If you cannot view mature-content and/or R-rated films for any reason, it is highly-recommended that you do not take this course.

This syllabus is subject to revision.