

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Madadayo (1993)

Akira Kurosawa

### OVERVIEW

Kurosawa's *No regrets for our youth* (1946) was an early film in which Kurosawa took us inside Japanese academic-intellectual life, at a time when intense cultural political issues were simmering and threatening. We were introduced to an academic household—especially to Professor Yagihara and his daughter Yukie, at the University of Kyoto.—at a moment when Japan itself was making aggressive military moves into Manchuria, forerunner moves to the outbreak of World War II. Prof Yagihara was actively opposed to the Fascist party which is promoting aggression, and though his students love him he is in the verge of losing his job—which he does—because of his opinions. His daughter, Yukie, is courted by two of his students, one of whom she eventually marries. There is more, and it is a telling commentary on the room, in the Japan of that time, for dissent and oppression, for the intensities of the life of the mind. And that is just the point we are driving at, that Kurosawa was from the start a brilliant painter of the intensities and distinctive atmospheres of an intellectual culture under pressure. It is of extreme interest to us, as we come to terms with Kurosawa's range, to find him closing his book of achievements with a second film about Japanese intellectual-academic life.

*Madadayo* (1993) is another work of academic atmosphere and expectations, this time played out on the far side of a calamitous war, in fact, the far side of an economic revival which has by this time scattered an almost benign light over the history of a culture. (Japan has suffered frightful material losses, but has by the time of this movement become one of the world's most prosperous nations.) This time we meet another professor, but not an intellectually feisty dialectician, rather a mellow and beloved humanist, not at the stage of world engagement but on the cusp of retirement. It is as if Kurosawa is providing us with back to back portraits of himself, at two different stages in his own life.

*Auteur* Kurosawa is a master of the deflected self-portrait. Is it because he is foremost a painter, used to the distortions imposed on the individual by the effort to make himself visible? He has, in any case, the intellectual radiance to be felt at every level of his self-expression. The potential of what Kurosawa gives us of himself, in the present film, is his consciousness of the realized self he exists implicitly. The other into whom he projects himself, in the present film, is a prolific Japanese author of both fiction and non-fiction. Hyakken Uchida, who was born on 1889, and who framed his brilliant—but to most of the world obscure-- writing life with a Professorship of German at the Imperial Japanese Army Academy. What exactly led to Kurosawa's choice of double, in the present matter, is not clear, but that he was able to hit on a congenial match seems evident from the felicity with which Tatsuo Matsumora plays into the role Kurosawa has fitted out for him. As often, much of Kurosawa's directing skill revolves around his great ability at casting.

*Film* Film, it had once seemed to this writer, is imaginative writing in chains. Kurosawa, of course, drives right through the middle of such clichés. He is poly artistic, to start with, an avid reader, and a career-sensitive painter. The chance of employment—with a communications tech company, which assured him background savvy in ground base work with the lens and camera worlds-- needless to say, this convoluted language wishes to indicate how deeply Kurosawa hoped to become the new voice of his time. What this naïve younger guy slowly realizes, through his contact with the films of Kurosawa, is that in fluent film work the imagination dances in its chains, like the ocean, and like the ocean invents ever new patterns of refabricating itself.

*Historical background* The tradition of the revered or preternaturally wise teacher is ancient and worldwide. Religious leaders often provide examples of such exemplary individualism—Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Plato or in our day Martin Luther King or Mohandas Gandhi. There is also the theme of the

scholar wiseman, a by-product of formal education who brings the knowledge of the ages into the main stream of the ages in their learning process. Quite naturally the summit reached by the transcendent wisdom figures is of a rare altitude, seldom attained by the workmen of thought values, but whiffed by any number of the 'assistant professors of the mind.' We have to think that Kurosawa melds outward into that noosphere where wisdom is transecting lives, and asking them to become their own betters. He will have been the first to have read Faust into the thrill of the learning process, and to have found in Professor Uchida a quiet simulacrum of the master whose reckless mental daring went out willingly to confront the devil.

## PLOT

The main character is interwoven with a noteworthy, but modest and retiring Professor of German. At a tense time in Japanese cultural history, and with the intelligentsia in search of supporting values to hold to during a time of great national insecurity, universities became havens for open discourse, and seasoned professors found themselves serving as counsellors and advisors. (The older American professoriat will easily remember the sixties protests against the Vietnam war, when many rare student-faculty rapprochements made themselves felt, and intellectual unity surged in rare form.) As the film opens the benign but astute professor is about to top off his last class by announcing his sixtieth birthday and his upcoming retirement, at which a clamor of disappointment breaks forth. Deafening cries of disappointment fill the classroom, but the firm impression remains, that we have lived the passing of a major humanist.

We are questioning ourselves about the ranges of humor/comedy/irony in Kurosawa's work. Is there such a dimension? Would we find it in the whimsical of the beginning of *Dodeskaken*? Would we find it in the two rough figures who shuffle past us at the beginning of *The Hidden Fortress*? Would we find it in the visual game the main characters of *One wonderful Sunday* play with each other, around the train station stanchion? My answer to the question posed here is nuanced. Kurosawa is easy with rare jocularly and with spurts of the ironic and even whimsical, but he is by no means a humorist. He is far more comfortable with the grand, the provocative, or the pugnacious. Of that kind of humor whose motto remains 'what fools these mortals be' we find little in Kurosawa. The male jocularly binding the professor's students to him betokens bonding and good cheer, but not the depths of the human condition. In any case we need at this point to register the amazing in Kurosawa's tonality: the very private in playfulness. This tonality we can track as the war grinds to a halt. In that harrowing process, not only is Uchida's house destroyed by U.S. bombs, but Uchida and his wife move into a small shack close to their former mansion; no indoor toilet, only their few remaining possessions.

At the end of the war, Uchida's students throw what is about to become an annual Madadayo ('not yet') banquet, in which the theme is Uchida's 'not yet' to death, the big retirement. At the end of the team's first postwar celebration two American military policemen arrive to check out the noise, but noting the high good humor smile and turn away. The Professor's students continue to play a role in his retired life. He builds a small new house for himself; his students do the construction, maintaining their annual banquet, and extending their fidelity to the master. We experience the seventeenth annual 'not yet' banquet together, without fully realizing that it will be the last 'not yet' banquet. The professor dies in a golden glow.

## CHARACTERS

*Professor Uchida* The prominent but modest University professor—and in fact writer of distinguished essays and stories—who is the central figure of this film. We first meet him as he concludes his last formal class of the year before his exuberant and affectionate students. He is, in his coy fashion, on the verge of announcing that he is retiring, but on the question of whether that means that he will leave them he refuses to reply, or rather replies 'madadayo,' 'not yet,' the refrain he will repeat seventeen more years, during which he will meet annually for dinner with these same students, and eventually with their wives and children.

*The Professor's wife.* A steady companion to her husband 'not yet' tale.

*Devoted students.*

*Old lady* holding a cat.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Professor Uchida was a beloved Prof of German, who remained faithful to his students—and they to him—for seventeen years after his retirement. Not only did the students continue to celebrate his annual 'maidadayo' banquets but they pitched in to build him a new house. Their devotion to him was paralleled only by his to them.

## THEMES

**Loyalty.** 'Not yet' becomes a mantra for the Professor's and his students' refusal to accept an end game for their time together. Their loyalty to one another, in these turbulent just postwar years, provides them all, students and Prof, with a recourse in which to find security in the ideal, loyalty.

**Collegiality.** Bonding together, students and their Professor, makes the basis for common work and common purpose. While students and their Prof represent different stages on the learning scale, their, common participation in history, disclosure as it is happening, bonds them powerfully.

**Gutsiness.** The Prof himself shows a remarkable persistence to his profession. His strength of character sustains him in his loyalty to his students and to their common learning mission.