

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Hunter / Dersu Uzala (1975)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

The present film was a joint venture of Mosfilm, the Soviet Film Agency, the producer of *Dodeskaden* (1970). The antecedent to this joint venture is startling to the follower of Kurosawa's career. In 1971, after the lack of success of *Dodeskaden*, and the drying up of Japanese studio support for the director's future plans, the discouraged director tried to take his life. A new life direction was needed by Kurosawa, and that direction was supplied by his employers. In 1972 the producers of *Dodeskaden* were approached by the Soviet Studio Mosfilm 'for an adaptation of the Russian memoir *Dersu Uzala*, to be directed by Kurosawa.' In 1973 Kurosawa signed the deal that committed him to a one year production stint, much of it in the Soviet Far East, the scene of the events experienced during the 1920's and memorialized by Vladimir Arsenyev, the Russian explorer who wrote *Dersu Uzala*.

Auteur After reaching a point of desolation, the Japanese film industry having rejected him after the poor commercial showing of *Dodeskaden*, which was itself a major departure even from the wide ranging limits of his oeuvre, Kurosawa pressed the limits of his daring pride too far and tried to kill himself by slashing his throat. The next film to issue from his directorship represents the quite radical mindshift one might expect as the aftermath of an attempt by an existentialist to remove himself from being. We don't know in detail what kind of private transactions led Mosfilm to enter into negotiations with Yoichi Matsue, the producer of *Dodeskaden*, but from those negotiations emerged Mosfilm's invitation for an adaptation of the Russian memoir *Dersu Uzala*, to be directed by Kurosawa. On January 1, 1973, the deal was signed, guaranteeing Kurosawa complete creative control. (Mosfilm also wanted a guarantee that the principal actor would be Kurosawa's brother genius, Toshiro Mifune, who was by this time virtually the trademark of Kurosawa's creative style. This demand could not be met as the actor was unable to spend so much time in the Russian Arctic. The Tuvan actor, Maxim Munzuk, assumed the acting role in the film.)

Film It seems that Kurosawa, who was an aficionado of Russian literature, had long wanted to work with Arsenyev's book, and would earlier have tried to film it had it not been necessary to spend extensive time in the Russian Arctic. Now, at this crisis moment in his life, Kurosawa was ready to commit himself to what would become a full year of shooting on the taiga. In fact it may have been just what his mind needed. The themes pervading the film are therapeutic for an older and life questioning genius. The tribute to friendship lies at the center of the work, always the most bracing life of creation. *Dersu* gives the director plentiful love of the kind guaranteed to soothe a wounded ego. (Think of the blow to Kurosawa, rejected at the peak of his career by the industry he had so tenaciously nurtured!) Then *Dersu*, through Arsenyev's text, re indoctrinates Kurosawa in the mysteries of doing life well. Not only could this genius of survival on the taiga save his fellows from the harshness of Siberia, but he was totally natural to the life of hunting, hut construction, or leather tooling, survival skills which will have spoken to the Kurosawa momentarily separated from the art of life.

Historical Background The memoir on which the present narrative is based was written by Vladimir Arsenyev, in 1923, and named for a native Tuvan trapper, whom Arsenyev had met and admired in his ethnographic trips through the Shkotovo region of Ussuri in the Russian Far East. This Russian explorer, who was in fact one of the premier Russians to map, study, and scrutinize the Russian Far East from the standpoint of ethnography and natural history, made the acquaintance of Dersu Uzala on one of his numerous expeditions into Siberia. His account of a couple of trips with Dersu, through the taiga, is the basis of the film which Mosfilm contracted to sponsor under Kurosawa's direction. The fact that is remarkable is that the Soviet Union—1922-1991—permitted filming access to Eastern Siberia at all—for it was never usual for the U.S.S.R. to grant access to its lands, especially to such a foreign film studio.

PLOT

Early in the 1900's Arsenyev, a career military officer with the Russian Army, undertakes a topographical expedition in the Shkotovo region of Ussuri territory. In the course of the trip he encounters a hunter trapper member of the Goldi tribe; a man who lives embedded in wild nature and one with it. Arsenyev invites him to be the expedition's guide on their next trip. Dersu, the hunter trapper, agrees, and accordingly follows the next expedition, rapidly impressing the trip members with his knowledge of survivorship in nature as well as by his natural human likeability. One of the most gripping scenes, of this first expedition, takes place when Arsenyev and Dersu are caught in a blizzard on a frozen lake. Wind howling, temperatures descending through the floor, Dersu saves both of their lives by building a shelter of dried swamp grass, where the men are able to survive the night. After a sequence of such traumatizing experiences, and with the close of the expedition, Arsenyev invites Dersu to settle in the city; but the hunter refuses, insisting that he cannot live away from the taiga.

Five years later, Arsenyev undertakes his second expedition, and looks for Dersu to guide them. Once again dramatic adventures close them in. The most life threatening occurs to the party when they are hurtling down a river approaching a deadly rapids; seeing that Arsenyev is about to tumble down into the whitewater, Dersu throws him out of the canoe and saves his life. In a later episode, Dersu realizes that their party is being stalked by a Siberian tiger. Having lost his sense of the sacred and its taboos, Dersu fires a shot at the animal, then realizes what he has done, committed a sacrilege. From that point on Dersu understands that he is aging, and that he has lost his touch for the sacredness of nature.

Finally, once again, the Captain invites Dersu to return with him to the city, but after a short visit Dersu returns to his true home, the wilderness. He is soon discovered, shot to death with the rifle the Captain has given him, to protect himself.

CHARACTERS

Maxim Munzuk. As Dersu Uzala, he plays the role of the hunter trapper who guided Vladimir Arsenyev on several topographical expeditions in the Soviet Arctic. While Mosfilm lobbied for Mifune to play the lead role of Dersu in this film, Mifune was unable to play the role, which would have demanded too lengthy residence in Russia. Munzuk was in fact an excellent choice for the role. He was a polymath intellectual, folklorist, and museum director from the Soviet Far East, as well as an actor thoroughly familiar with the Soviet Arctic; he was widely commended for his performance as Dersu.

Vladimir Arsenyev. The author of the present memoir, and the 'Capitan,' to whom Dersu is forever calling out protectively. Yuri Splomin played the part straight; Arsenyev comes out as a touchingly pragmatic, loyal, and ready to learn explorer, who is ultimately in sync with Dersu about the meanings of aging and friendship. In the end he is the hunter's best friend.

Assorted natives, close to the practices of Arctic living, fill out the corners of this profound and haunting memoir.

THEMES

Survival. From the film's opening we meet Arsenyev and Dersu in a blasting winter blizzard on an ice covered lake in the Soviet Arctic. Dersu knows immediately what needs to be done; to throw together a mountainous pile of branches and sea grasses, under which the two men can survive through the night. On other occasions, too, Dersu intervenes to save the 'Capitan' from a fatal misstep.

Self-sacrifice. Dersu is always thinking about how to make life better for others. When leading the captain's expedition he comes on an abandoned cabin which might sometime serve someone as an overnight shelter; he is careful to leave some provisions for the next chance occupant.

Nature. Nature is the single dominant figure in this film. It is our *Umwelt*, the world around us. Blizzards on ice, raging whitewater torrents, immaculate snow flattened landscapes, deep thick sun dappled forests; everything on a vast silent scale.

Friendship. Chance alone brought Dersu and Arsenyev together, one on an expedition with the Russian military, the other as a canny hunter trapper, whose whole life belonged to the Russian Far East. They felt natural human warmth toward one another, and in the end Arsenyev offered his very home to his 'brother.'

Aging. During the time together, we have a chance to notice the aging process in Dersu. A sacred tiger appears to be trailing along beside the expeditionary group; Dersu feels anxiety and guilt—he isn't sure why—and he fires at and wounds the animal. Afterwards, considering his impetuosity and carelessness, he begins to see that he is slipping. He has broken a taboo.