

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## One Wonderful Sunday (1947)

Akira Kurosawa

### OVERVIEW

Fellini (1920-1993), Truffaut (1932-1984), Vittorio de Sica (1901-1974): all capture the post WW II mood, catching it as it spreads its aroma of deadly loss, spring like freshness, and simple sadness. De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* the example par excellence. What could more poignantly touch our sense of that moment than the search of a man and his son through war battered Rome, for the stolen bicycle the man counts on for the little food for his family table? In the film before us Kurosawa introduces us to just such a miniature of calamity, a close up portrait of a Sunday date in the city. A young man and young woman are in love but are broke, and must content themselves with a simple routine of pleasures on their one day off a week. They face us, as we face them, at the beginning of what should become a wonderful Sunday, but keeps getting in the way of itself. In fact Kurosawa is a master of just this kind of everyday obstruction of our plans. In *Scandal* the accident of being spied on by paparazzi deeply affects the fate of the singer and the painter. In *The Hidden Fortress* the two protagonist rogues find their lives transformed by their luck of being mistaken for soldiers of the enemy army.

*Auteur* Kurosawa is a master of large implications, but knows how to embed the wide view in details. In the film before us our couple's Sunday exposes them to a variety of adverse experiences--looking vainly for an apartment to rent, coming on a holding tank of bummed out addicts and streeties, chatting with a feral street kid who treats them with contempt, visiting a zoo, whose denizens treat *them* as the odd ones out, ultimately making their way to an all sold out public free concert of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. There is no plan to this city wandering, unless it is the absence of any theme. The one constant, certainly, is the two lovers' quest for a stability which will allow them to rest together, and this is precisely what is being made impossible for them.

*Film* As at the beginning of *Drunken Angels*, or throughout *Dodeskaden* or *Stray Dog*, Kurosawa excels in rendering the dilapidation and poverty of the post war city. One would say that he simply films, as with an open camera, across a random field of cityscapes. (This is of course not true, any more than that Jackson Pollock throws paint against a wall, in order to create his masterpieces.) It is true, however, that Kurosawa is noted for his cunning use of low panning shots, which seem to lead the audience's vision across a deeply layered cross section of debris, rubble, and broken infrastructure. He has a pack of visual tricks. How does he introduce us to the relation between Yuzo and Masako? Yuzo is waiting behind a rail way stanchion when Masako's train arrives at the station. At first she does not see him, and as she looks for him he skitters cat and mouse around the stanchion just ahead of her. Eventually he is revealed to view so that he can run and hug her. The cinema's action perfectly mimes the charm and fascination of this weekly tryst. One further detail, to indicate how deftly Kurosawa opens a text. Before we know the arriving Masako, we see the nicotine hungry and penurious Yuzo bending to pick up, and start smoking, a half extinguished cigarette from the dirty pavement where it is expiring. Masako arrives. She tosses the fag in the trashcan. The need, pain, and control system of the couple's relationship is summed up in this vignette.

*Historical background* Kurosawa employs here the fourth wall technique, which has a long history in the performing arts, going back in literature at least to Chaucer. In the case of the present play the performers, Yuzo and Masako, slip into their imaginations, where they are immersed in the performance of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, the piece of music they were prevented by the black market from hearing earlier in the day. The wall that conventionally separates performer from audience is suddenly broken, and our two needy but exalted protagonists are directly addressing the audience, begging them for their applause. The audience is asked thereby to suspend their agreement to the conventional

perception, which establishes a wall of artifice between the actors and the audience, and to relate directly to the actors. The wall between the two groups is smashed, so powerful was the drive of the needing protagonists, to be heard even in their 'unfinished condition.'

## PLOT

Yuzo and his fiancée, Masako, meet every Sunday for a daylong date, and for respite from their routine jobs and ordinary lives. On this particular Sunday they converge from separate directions on the central Tokyo train station, eager to see one another, but painfully aware that they have only a very limited supply of yen between them. That shortage of funds immediately hits them, for they had been planning, this week, to try to rent an apartment where they could live together. Various contrary episodes fill in the day. The two lovers check out a flat, but it is too expensive. They go to a club but are turned away because their dress is too shabby. Yuzo plays baseball with a bunch of street kids, turning high spirited until he accidentally damages a *manju* shop. Finally the couple go to a zoo only to find that the animals are viewing *them* as the curiosities.

In the second half of the film, the disappointed lovers return to the flat which Yuzo shares with a friend, who will not be home until later that evening. In a moment of high frustration, Yuzo tries to force himself on Masako, who flees, and then, returning to get her purse, reconciles with her lover. As the rain finally stops, they go out for a coffee, only to find that they have been overcharged; Yuzo has to leave his coat as collateral against the bill. As they leave the café, however, their spirits begin to rise, and the two begin to dream, together, of the fine café they hope to build 'for the masses.' They fantasize opening their café in a vacant lot, as they pass. Finally Yuzo takes Masako to an outdoor amphitheater where Yuzo performs a make believe performance of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. Masako calls on the make believe audience to join them in applause. For a moment stasis and harmony take over the world.

## CHARACTERS

Masako, the fiancée of Yuzo. An upbeat youngster, perennially optimistic. She reaches her breaking point, at the end of 'One Wonderful Sunday.' By the end of the film she has recovered an exalted hope.

Yuzo, fiancé of Masako. Feels responsible for playing the 'macho' role, but works against odds, lacking the money required of the couple at every turn. He is easily discouraged, but in the end a cosmic dreamer.

Dessert shop owner; the small businessman selling sweet rolls. After initial anger at Yuzo, he calms down and gives the ball thrower a couple of bonus buns.

Sleazy black marketeer; an underground figure whom Yuzo mistakenly follows.

Down and out young boy, whom Yuzo and Masako meet in the slums.

Ticket seller, offers tickets to Schubert concert, only to reveal that they have all been sold out.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Yuzo is the would-be guide to this 'wonderful date.' He feels the burden of manhood but hasn't enough money to plan for the Sunday outing. In place of yen he substitutes imagination, hope, and finally, in tandem with Masako, exaltation. He is a complex and moody character, 'of imagination all compact.' In the end we love him, for he is part of us.

## THEMES

**Poverty** Yuzo and Masako are not the poorest of the poor--have not been reduced to the level of the losers in *Drunken Angels*, or of the slum dweller losers who people *Dodeskaden*--but they count their yen closely, and go without many simple pleasures, not to mention the pleasure of renting a tiny flat to live in. They live in their imaginations, even when it comes to their mutual dream, to build a small café, where they can serve quality coffee to the masses at a reasonable price. Acting out these vibrant emotions takes the two lovers to an outdoor auditorium, where in an exalted state, joined to their audience by imagination alone, they belong temporarily to the richness of the universe.

**Romance** The two young lovers are classics of their type, living in dream worlds peopled by one another and so full of their mutual love that they invite the whole world to join them. It is inevitable, given their circumstances, that the big bad wolf of reality will eventually consume these youthful victims. It is equally probable that they will emerge on the far side of being eaten, and make it into the middle class.

**Imagination** Constricted by poverty and by their limited luckiness in life, the two lovers have to imagine, for themselves, the kind of lives they would most value for themselves. The sky is the limit, they find in their breaking of the fourth wall, and they imagine an audience flexible enough to follow them to their summit. This is what is called 'using their imagination.'

**Hope** After leaving the coffee shop, where the couple have been overcharged, and where Yuzo has been obliged to leave his overcoat as collateral, Yuzo and Masako wander out into the clear air--the rain has stopped--and let their hopefulness spring to life again. They are fundamentally dreamers and, as the course of the present day shows, nothing will dampen their hope, which 'springs eternal in the human breast.'

**Capital** Nothing thaws the hard heart of capital, the dark shadow of which hangs over the couple's Sunday. At every turn they are thwarted by absence of money, whether it is money to rent a flat, to pay for *café au lait*, or to buy tickets for a concert. Without this looming absence there would not be a clear index of what the couple do have, hope and imagination.

## SCENES

Yuzo and his fiancée Masako meet in Tokyo for their every Sunday date. They have little money but they are determined to make a wonderful day of it. They begin with disappointments. Their money will not cover the down payment on a flat.

Yuzo leaps enthusiastically into a ball game with some street kids, but he slams the ball so hard it knocks over several displays of buns. Yuzo goes in search of an old friend in a hotel, but he is informed that he is not well enough dressed even to enter the establishment. The two lovers go to the zoo, for free entertainment, but are disappointed to find the animals looking at *them*, as though *they* were the real attraction. The couple try to go to a concert of Schubert but find that all the tickets have sold out.

The rain starting to fall heavily, the couple retreat to the flat which Yuzo shares with a friend. Yuzo, deeply discouraged by the day, tries to make out with Masako. She rejects him, then they make up.

Outside in the fresh air, the couple stroll, have some coffee, reflect on their private dream of starting a small café. In an exalting scene the two move to an outdoor amphitheater, where the wall of distance and difference, separating them from the audience, melts to leave them making the music of their souls for the universe at large.