

Humanities Institute  
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# The Most Beautiful (1943)

Akira Kurosawa

## OVERVIEW

Kurosawa is a wonderfully diverse film maker, can cast wide nets of historical drama, with a cast of thousands, can create a contemporary film noir, straight out of the dangerous streets of the post-industrial world, but can also create masterpieces, as in the present film, which walk quietly over obdurate material to produce tiny masterpieces. To my mind he has produced several of these small masterpieces, besides the present film. I think of *Dodeskaden*, for example, or of *Scandal*. The choice is in fact wide but these two early films fit the case.

*Dodeskaden* is a sequence of miniature snapshots of life on or in the dump or landfill on which the City of Tokyo is built. Our eyes are fixed on one character after another, as their dreary, brutal or whimsical lives play out. These vignettes show us Kurosawa at his most human.

*Scandal*, also an early film, shows us Kurosawa in the role of social critic, one he frequently adopts. A trivial incident sets it off. A society painter and a well-known singer find themselves heading on foot toward the hotel where they both happen to be staying--but with no previous knowledge of one another. Lo and behold they are filmed by a money hungry camera crew from a local scandal sheet. The movie involves the heartrending complexities pursuant on involvement with indifferent and cynical bureaucracy.

Both of these modest films give room for Kurosawa's cinematic tact, in dealing with daily settings and pretty banal events. The film before us, in this entry, promises even less than the other, in the way of high drama.

Kurosawa has been invited to create a propaganda film about the Japanese war effort--we are in the midst of the war, 1943, when the film is made---celebrating in particular the devoted effort of a cohort of Japanese volunteer women, to meet and even surpass their production quotas, as seen by their bosses in a wartime military optics factory. The mandate before the Director of this film is to provide impetus to the threatened Japanese war effort. At the same time, however, the Director must win sufficient human interest from the theme, enough at least to fire up the watcher's attention.

*Auteur* The hardest of challenges was not beyond even the beginner Kurosawa. With deftness he contrives to make us feel the bonds, and tensions, among the young women, and the atmosphere of impending doom--by this time the Japanese were losing the war--which hung over the women's fierce desire to exceed their quotas. How best does Kurosawa make this point? When their male bosses appear, they tell the women that a new production level has been declared--100 per cent increase for the men, fifty percent for the women--the women are enraged, insisting that they are able to carry at least two thirds of the male load.

*Film* The film in question here is not a product of the realm of imagination, but a gently managed documentary of a social price. We are introduced directly into the community of working girls and rarely leave that scene. The girls huddle around their worktables, studying the clarity of the lenses with which they are working--the work is with optical lenses for military hardware-- or on occasion greeting the visiting parents of one of these fellow workers.

*Historical background* At the time of filming a wholehearted salute to the Japanese war effort-- the Japanese were beginning to lose the war. Fighting in the Pacific had grown hugely and Japan had begun

to envision the possibility of war on its own shores. Kurosawa, among many from Japan's creative community were being called in to beef up the war effort.

## PLOT

The Japanese government was extremely eager to boost its war capacity, and to that end subsidized a great many propaganda films in the course of the Second World War. As we see in the present film the government built separate dormitories and workrooms for volunteers to the war effort, and it is in just such an away from home setting that the present film takes place. Vignettes give us occasional insights into life in the dorms. One girl is sick, and has to rejoin her family, for which she feels terrible guilt. The managers repeat that high production requires good character, and the girls worry endlessly about how to improve their character. In the end one of the girls develops a high fever, but at risk of dying persists in her work.

## CHARACTERS

Characters and character analysis are not relevant to this brief film in which patriotism is the single dominant character. The film is in fact best understood as a paean to patriotism, rather than to personality.

## THEMES

**Patriotism** This film is entirely devoted to the inspiration of patriotism in the Japanese people at a time when, as it happens, the war is beginning to turn against them. Patriotism is a universal theme, cropping up whenever human communities, especially in the overgrown form of nations, wish to fortify their material strength with an aura of sanctity.

**Self-discipline** To be patriotic, as Kurosawa praises his young women volunteers for being, is clearly to be committed to a national goal and to the dignity of your own self-respect. It is noteworthy that this same theme becomes a leitmotif for the bosses of the military, who are forever reminding the ladies that person's dignity is intimately linked to the power to contribute.

**Precision** The greatest mishap to strike our work crew, during the film, occurs when one of the women volunteers misplaces one of the military optic lenses she is responsible for polishing and filing. The tension in the already overwrought work area crackles. The group have a minor role to play in the Japanese war effort and yet they take their responsibility as seriously as can any Admiral of the line.

**Collective emotion** War channels emotions into sides, and if possible treats each of those sides as though it alone represented all the truth and justification of the entire conflict. It is obvious that the women volunteers, in the current script, will at last express no two sides to the struggle their military is engaged in.

**Shame** The occasional volunteer, in the labor force we are considering, is forced by illness or the death of a parent to request temporary leave from her workplace. No one wishes to find herself in this position, which brings with it a load of internal shame. One cannot live a clean conscience if one is absent from the all-embracing war-effort.

**Scenes** We enter the dormitory, where dozens of young women--in their twenties-- are bustling about work tables. They are checking lenses and making notes and gossiping. This is the standard default situation for the film.

We hear the girls in their dorm, singing patriotic songs about the crushing of the United States and Great Britain.

On the work floor there is much talk about production levels. Management loudspeakers raise the theme that productivity levels correlate directly with the personal growth of the workers.

Management announcements are heard at regular intervals, reminding the girls that all great work is collective.

The mother of one of the girls falls seriously ill and the girl feels torn about visiting her--clash tween love and piety--but her father forbids her to leave the workplace. For him, too, the war effort comes first.

One of the girls takes a bad fall, and for some time is unable to walk. However she finds a pair of crutches, and is able to continue her work. She is roundly praised.

Another girl grows ill in the workplace, and develops a high fever. Fearing that her parents will learn of this, and oblige her to go home, the girl keeps at her work, and survives the fever at her workplace.

One of the girls misplaces one of the precious optical lenses it is her job to polish and file. Desperate, she spends the night combing the floor in the dirt near her desk. At dawn she finds it.

In the end the daughter of the mom who was dying loses her mother. While grieving, she does not lose an hour of her work.

Kurosawa himself plays a continual and active role among the characters he is presenting. His heart is with the girls, and doubtless to some degree with the Japanese war effort. . However the Director, the master of subtlety and multi-sided perspectives, cannot fail to be present here as a touch of irony.