

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Ikiru 1960

Akiro Kurosawa. 1910-1988

STORY

In an age like ours, of digital work, it can be hard to recover the atmosphere of the little man in the office, surrounded by handwritten copies, seals to imprint, low level lighting, and seemingly endless bureaucratic shuffling. The little man of the office—in Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Melville, Tolstoy, back to Bob Cratchit in Dickens—this is the herald of a stage, in western bureaucracy, which emerged from the new mass societies, with their new methods of accounting and self-justification, which characterized the ‘western world’—also industrialized eastern countries like Japan-- as it thrashed its way into and through the Industrial Revolution.

Opening. The film *Ikiru* opens with matters of life and death. (*Ikiru* is the Japanese verb *to live*.) We are looking at the x-ray of a human stomach with just barely visible symptoms of stomach cancer growing in it. A voice-over informs us, drily, that ‘this is an x-ray picture of a stomach; it belongs to the man this story is about. Symptoms of cancer are there but he doesn’t yet know anything about it.’ Then we move into a busy Japanese Government office building, and are introduced to the desk of Kanji Watanabe, Chief of the Citizens’ Section at City Hall, the key man for citizen complaints and suggestions. The voice-over/director lets us know, as we observe the man, that he is not yet very interesting, is just a small scale paper stamper, as we can observe. That he may be interesting in future, the director suggests. We are not sure. We feel some amused distance from this quintessential ‘little guy.’

Frustration. For a while we gaze at the bemused mechanical activity of the dour looking Watanabe, as he carries out his pretty mechanical task of signing and stamping official documents. Elsewhere on his service floor a contingent of lower-middle housewives has come to register a complaint; their neighborhood is infested with mosquitoes, thanks to an uncovered sewage area in their neighborhood. The complainants are sent to Watanabe, who refers them to other offices; we see them pass from one office to another, without effect, until eventually they are sent back to Watanabe’s own desk. By this time, however, Watanabe has left his desk to go to the hospital, to check on the results of his x-ray.

Doctor. In the waiting room of the hospital, another prospective patient gossips to Watanabe that, if the doctor finds traces of cancer, he will do all he can to reassure you that nothing is wrong, that you simply ‘have ulcers.’ This is exactly what happens to Watanabe, who leaves the doctor’s office convinced—and rightly so—that he has stomach cancer. From this moment on, Watanabe is a changed person, his eyes brighter and more startled, his routinized commitment to his work shaken, and his horizons enlarged.

Reactions. Watanabe is fearful, but reaches out in different directions, to deflect or modify his fear.

First recourse. His efforts to gain support from his son and daughter in law are basically unsuccessful, for ever since Watanabe’s wife’s death he has closed in on himself. In addition his son and daughter in law are selfish, and uninterested in Watanabe.

Second recourse. A more developed phase of Watanabe’s reaction, to the news of his cancer, involves him with a writer of cheap novels, who meets him in a cabaret, and offers to show him around the town; a two-bit Mephistopheles for whom Watanabe is a shaggy and yet fascinated Faust.

Third recourse. Watanabe’s third recourse is a woman who works in his office, and who takes a (non-sexual) interest in squiring him around, and having fun with him, ‘looking at the sights.’ Watanabe is deeply inspired simply by the fun of being with this woman, and even though she eventually tells him she doesn’t want to see him anymore, he is inspired by her existence into reforming his own. He returns

to routine at his office, but instead of simply taking a humane-amused interest in people's problems, he grows activist. One of his achievements is to supervise the construction of a children's playground, where the mosquito affected area had earlier degraded life for the contingent of complaining women, who had gone to see Watanabe in his office, just as he was going off to the hospital.

Conclusion. The lengthy coda of the film takes time to make the point, that Watanabe eventually turned his naturally humane eye into an even finer expression of his learning and growing. His achievement in turning around the toxic waste spot, and in establishing a park, attracts the attention of his former colleagues, who begin to buzz with admiration of him, and to make mandatory praise comments about him. At his wake, former colleagues are profuse in praise—although as the sake flows, their attention flows away too—and the women whose children have benefitted from the park arrive to moan at the passing of so great a benefactor. The final touches of the film swim together into a growing tribute to Watanabe.

THEMES

Bureaucracy. When we first see Watanabe he is a classic small bureaucrat, with enough discretionary power to make us lament his indifference. He is surrounded by his kind, trading jealousies, stale jokes, and despair about the higher ups who care only for bribes.

Indifference. When the delegation of ladies comes, to request help with sanitizing a mosquito infected area, they are routinely sent from one office to another, without attention to their needs.

Civil pressure. In the background of the women's protest, is the implication that there is a movement for change in the society. Even the multiple welfare offices, through which the women are routinely recycled, are evidence that 'on the books' there are places of recourse for people with general social complaints.

Moral growth. Watanabe himself grows, in the course of the film, from a humane but weary widower into—to exaggerate a little-- a life embracing activist. (A tired and unwell activist.). For the women who come to his wake he has become a welcome symbol of freshness and change.

CHARACTERS

Watanabe is a civil servant, a paper-stamping mid level bureaucrat, whose job is to keep the system as it is, to recycle customer complaints, and to keep a low profile. He is able to satisfy these requirements until the oncoming fact of his death wakes him up, and he feels obliged to live again. He does so with the help of a compassionate office mate, a stealthy writer, and finally his own growing commitment, to a small social development.

Mitsuo. Watanabe's son, Mitsuo, has long been indifferent to his father, and treats the old man with little interest, when it comes to the news of his cancer. Too much indifference has destroyed the son's relation to his father.

Toyo. Toyo is a fellow employee in Watanabe's government office. She takes a liking to him—his wry smile, his good heart—and for a time the two become a (non-sexual) couple. Her good nature, and positive attitude toward doing good, are decisive factors in pulling Watanabe out of cancer diagnosis depression.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

WATANABE

Character. Watanabe is a long time civil servant with the Japanese government. He sees himself as powerless to change society around him, and he is used to passing on complaints and requests to other offices, where he knows there will be no response, just

Infinite recycling. The film concerns the effect, on this sympathetic but mechanical man, of the knowledge that he has stomach cancer, and will soon die. The effect is galvanizing, and makes him a committed man.

Parallels. There are many parallels to the portrayal of Watanabe, the small man in a large bureaucracy, though most are critical-analytical studies, without a desire to show the transcendent developments of the character involved. One thinks of Chinua Achebe's *Obi*, in *No Longer at Ease*, of Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, of Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyitch*, of Gogol's *The Cloak*, or of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's underground man. The field is rich!

Illustrative moments

Working. We first see Watanabe as he is shuffling papers at his desk. He is hardly 'working,' actually just going through the mechanical motions of stamping papers as 'read and filed.' This is what 'working' means in his office.

Worrying. When he goes to the doctor, for an interpretation of his x-ray, Watanabe is disturbed by his conversation with a fellow patient, who implies that if the doc gives you an upbeat interpretation it probably means the worst.

Rebuffed. When Watanabe turns to his son for consolation, after intuiting the bad news the doctor does not give him, he is rebuffed by the selfish young man.

Swinging. In the last scenes of the film, the policeman who appears at Watanabe's wake reports having seen the man swinging joyfully in the night, in the playground he helped to have constructed.

Discussion questions

Is Kurasawa amused by Watanabe? What is 'funny' about Watanabe? What is 'funny' about Toyo, his lady office mate who befriends him?

Is Kurasawa making a large point about social progress? Or does he remain a pessimist, simply delighting in the successes of one man, Watanabe, as he deals with the challenge of leading a good life?