

Spotlight:

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

It has been quite a year for Mr. Kurosawa. He launched three different films – *License to Live*, *Charisma* and *Barren Illusion* – at, respectively, the Berlin, Cannes and Venice film festivals, a “triple crown” of cinema matched only by the great Krzysztof Kieślowski and his *Trois couleurs* trilogy. He was also the subject of retrospectives at the Hong Kong and Edinburgh festivals. Now we are pleased to put him in our *Spotlight* for 1999. This guy is hot!

The irony of all this attention is that Kurosawa has been making films for almost 15 years now. He was acknowledged by most of the directors in last year's *New Beat of Japan* programme as one of their key influences and, within Japanese critical circles, his name is well-known and respected. What gives?

After the explosion of personal, iconoclastic cinema in the eighties from figures such as Sogo Ishii and Naoto Yamakawa, many of us expected more of the same. But these directors – and Kurosawa was among them, with his fascinating meta-erotic collaboration with Juzo Itami, *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* – were largely unable to find production support systems to continue this kind of cinema. Some, like Sogo Ishii, took long breaks but Kurosawa and others kept working in the growing video market, striving to create interesting work in tired, low-budget genres, from yakuza flicks and broad comedies to Hollywood copycat policiers. The best of this work is vital, important cinema that serves as a “missing link” between eighties and late nineties Japanese cinema.

Perhaps Kurosawa's time has come now largely because the critical community has been forced to recognize the value of such genre-based cinema. From Jonathan Demme's frequent citations of his work with Roger Corman, to Quentin Tarantino's bricolage of exploitation cinema within his own work, to the rise and fall of the Hong Kong New Wave, genre cinema has clawed its way back into the critical centre.

Many of Kurosawa's recently celebrated films are “direct-to-video” productions, a phrase anathema to conventional ideas of “quality” cinema in America and Europe. Yet his ability to stretch genre mandates to accommodate metaphysical speculation, sociological analysis and intellectual playfulness at an impressively refined level make him a most extraordinary and unusual figure in contemporary cinema.

Kurosawa's films feature “regular guy” heroes put in unusual situations. They are tested not by the cunning of their enemy, as one might expect in this kind of cinema, but by forces outside of rational, human control. The powers of deep hypnosis in *Cure*, of ecological hegemony in *Charisma*, of ennui in *Barren Illusion*, of purely emotive revenge in the yakuza films, exist at the core of his work. He uses this profound fear of the unknowable to ask difficult philosophical questions about free will, personal identity and the notion of duty, the latter being particularly salient within Japanese culture. Many filmmakers are compared to novelists or playwrights but Kurosawa most resembles a game theorist, positing *recherché* examples of human behaviour to expose the profound irrationality of human consciousness.

Yet with all this extraordinary layering within his work there remains a more-than-surface veneer of great entertainment. His films are often full of funny sight gags and resound with beautifully orchestrated emotional epiphanies. When he makes a thriller, it actually thrills; his horror films are actually scary and his melodramas make you cry. He is, in short, a great filmmaker.

– Noah Cowan





Barren Illusion

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

JAPAN, 1999

95 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Euro Space Inc./
 The Film School of Tokyo/Japan Sky
 Way Co., Ltd.**

Producers: **Kenzo Horikoshi, Hiroko
 Matsuda**

Screenplay: **Kiyoshi Kurosawa**
 Cinematographer: **Takahide Shibunushi**
 Editor: **Masahiro Ohnaga**
 Production Designer: **Chie Matsumoto**
 Sound: **Nobuyuki Kikuchi**
 Music: **Dai Soma**

Principal Cast: **Shinji Takeda, Miako
 Tadano, Yutaka Yasui, Masamichi
 Matsumoto, Kazushige Inami**

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Production: **Euro Space Inc.,
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Kurosawa has collaborated with The Film School of Tokyo for the creation and production of his newest film, *Barren Illusion*. That explains the subject matter – alienated and dispirited young people – but otherwise the film's tone, complexity and the bitter irony of the title feel very much like the master's other recent work.

Haru runs a music production company with his friend Kenji. Neither of them thinks their work is particularly important and it certainly isn't profitable. Haru is drifting and has forgotten his youthful desires. He worries that he is disappearing, a fear that becomes all too real as the film progresses.

Haru's girlfriend, Michi, steals overseas packages from her post office job, fantasizing about escape to another land. Her desire to go abroad increases when she has a strange encounter with a woman in foreign ethnic dress.

Haru and Michi are in love but growing apart: they fight over a dog, they both become subjects in an experimental drug test that makes them infertile, they both have violent fantasies, her of suicide, he of gang war.

As the film progresses, their world becomes increasingly dreamlike and surreal. (The drug they take is intended to combat a strangely dense pollen floating through the air.) This tone culminates in a beach sequence that shatters their relationship, not to be resumed until a chance encounter years later.

Barren Illusion can be read as Kurosawa's ironic reappraisal of the alienated youth

genre. After all, nothing is particularly wrong with Haru and Michi's lives, except internally, and any attempt they make to change their situation is futile. But the film ultimately feels like Kurosawa working out some of his more radical narrative ideas: it contains very little dialogue and most of the important scenes happen in near silence; the story is told in fragments with little narrative exposition; the performances, even in moments of crisis, border on the laconic. Perhaps this is the master at play, but, even at his most experimental, Kurosawa is a confident and multi-layered filmmaker with provocative insights into the human condition.

– Noah Cowan



Charisma

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

JAPAN, 1999

103 minutes ■ Colour/70mm

Production Company: **Nikkatsu Corporation/King Records Co./Tokyo Theaters Co. Ltd.**

Executive Producers: **Masaya Nakamura, Nobuo Ikeguchi**

Producers: **Satoshi Kanno, Atsuyuki Shimoda**

Screenplay: **Kiyoshi Kurosawa**

Cinematographer: **Junichiro Hayashi**

Editor: **Junichi Kikuchi**

Production Designer: **Tomoyuki Maruo**

Sound: **Makio Ika**

Music: **Gary Ashiya**

Principal Cast: **Koji Yakusho, Hiroyuki Ikeuchi, Ren Osugi, Yoriko Doguchi, Jun Fubuki**

Print Source/Foreign Sales Agent:

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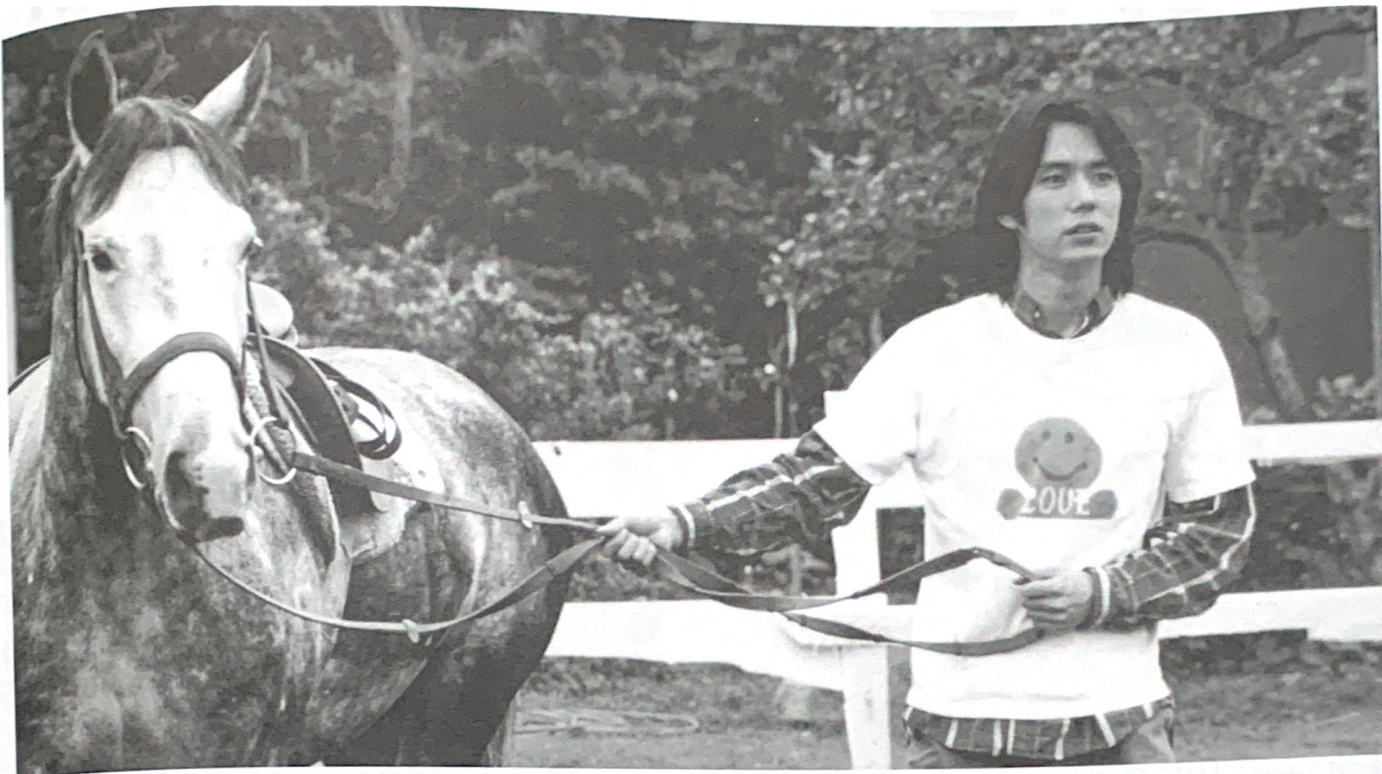
Kurosawa's sensational *Charisma* sees the master at his most adventurous. A truly bizarre film from concept to execution, it actually bookends, within its hundred or so minutes, Kurosawa's entire career. Written around the same time as *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* and then extensively rewritten last year when the financing for the project came through, it takes in the madly experimental and psychedelic ideas from his early directorial years, as well as the disciplined approach to genre that has characterized his recent work.

The film is best described as an environmental thriller in which the villain is a tree. The protagonist is Yabuike, a hostage negotiator who blows a big case and is sent on a forced holiday to a forested area. He soon encounters Charisma, a single tree surrounded by strange, almost altar-like objects. The tree exerts a powerful force on everything around it, including the scorched, barren land in its vicinity. The local residents are locked in battles around the tree's destruction or protection. These larger-than-life characters include a young man living in a sanitarium, a Lois Lane-like botanist who claims the tree secretes the most destructive toxin imaginable, brutish lumberjacks and rapacious plant collectors, seeking a piece of Charisma at any cost. Yabuike encounters each one and learns more and more about the tree. When, like any good policeman, he decides to act on his information, the tree shows it still has a trick or two up its sleeve.

(As is often the case with Kurosawa, the twist at the end is worth the price of admission.)

While seemingly outrageous, *Charisma* is in fact closer in spirit to Kurosawa's explicitly genre-based work than *License to Live*. Like *Cure*, it speculates on ways that human free will is thwarted by elements outside of rational control; and like the yakuza films, it asks what length a man will go to for his imagined duty.

— Noah Cowan



Ningen Gokaku

License to Live

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

JAPAN, 1999

109 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Daiei Co., Ltd.**
 Executive Producer: **Hiroyuki Kato**
 Producers: **Tsutomu Tsuchikawa,**
Satoshi Kanno
 Screenplay: **Kiyoshi Kurosawa**
 Cinematographer: **Junichiro Hayashi**
 Editor: **Masahiro Ohnaga**
 Production Designer: **Tomoyuki Maruo**
 Sound: **Makio Ika**
 Music: **Gary Ashiya**
 Principal Cast: **Hidetoshi Nishijima,**
Koji Yakusho, Shun Sugata, Lily,
Kumiko Asou

Print Source: **Daiei Co., Ltd., 1-1-16,**
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The most radically interior and personal of Kurosawa's films, *License to Live* is a perfectly directed meditation on personal identity. In pure Kurosawa conceptual style, it is also a family melodrama without a family. The film concerns a young man named Yutaka who wakes up from a 10-year coma, the result of a terrible car accident. At first he seeks to start his life where it had stopped. But this desire is thwarted immediately when he learns that his family, close-knit before his accident, has now dispersed around the world. Only an old friend of his father's, running a low-rent artificial pond business out of the family's old rural house, is there to take him "home." This leaves Yutaka depressed and volatile, quelled only by the fatherly admonitions of this strange pseudo-parent.

Various encounters with friends and acquaintances from his past confirm a near complete dislocation from the life he once led. In a last attempt to reclaim his personal history, Yutaka tries to build the dude ranch he had dreamed about as a boy. Soon after, his family begins reappearing until a most surprising and emotionally powerful twist seals Yutaka's isolation.

In addition to being a film of great cinematic accomplishment, *License's* poise and pacing are astonishingly precise; it also contributes a fascinating thesis to the debate about the self. The film suggests that even if we "drop out" of our lives for a time, our identity continues to evolve based on the

actions of those around us. As a "big concept" film, it points to a fresh direction in Kurosawa's work. The previous crime films seize on a number of interlocking social and metaphysical themes which play out throughout his work. The singularity of purpose in *License to Live* shows a new maturity and focus in Kurosawa's vision which is mirrored in the film's starkly minimalist style and deliberate narrative progression.

— Noah Cowan



Eyes of the Spider

Kumo No Hitomi

Eyes of the Spider

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

JAPAN, 1997

83 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Daiei Co., Ltd.**
 Executive Producer: **Tetsuya Ikeda**
 Producer: **Tsutomu Tsuchikawa,**
Atsuyuki Shimoda
 Screenplay: **Yoichi Noshiyama,**
Kiyoshi Kurosawa
 Cinematographer: **Masaki Tamura**
 Editor: **Kan Suzuki**
 Principal Cast: **Shoh Aikawa, Pankan**

Hebi No Michi

Serpent's Path

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

JAPAN, 1997

85 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Daiei Co., Ltd.**
 Executive Producer: **Tetsuya Ikeda**
 Producer: **Tsutomu Tsuchikawa,**
Atsuyuki Shimoda
 Screenplay: **Hiroshi Takahashi**
 Cinematographer: **Masaki Tamura**
 Editor: **Kan Suzuki**
 Principal Cast: **Shoh Aikawa,**
Teruyuki Kagawa

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In many ways, these two films currently stand as Kurosawa's most accomplished and sophisticated work. An enigmatic pair, the films both concern the desire for revenge in a man whose daughter has been killed by a gangster. The lead is the same in both films – the incomparable Shoh Aikawa – and at first one film appears to be the sequel of the other. But their relationship is nowhere near that simple.

The man in question is named Nijima in *Serpent's Path* and Nijima in *Eyes of the Spider*. There is no element that narratively connects the two films and they are strikingly different in tone. *Serpent* is a sombre, almost classical gangster film but it is filled with extremes of torture and violence. It is a bleak, nihilistic work with a profoundly dark view of humanity and its motives. *Spider*, by contrast, is quite light-hearted even though its body count is just as high. It tells its story in a much more absurdist fashion, with yakuza on roller skates and a paleontologist godfather. Its narrative is often fragmented and broken up by broad physical comedy. And, ultimately, it allows its characters a more human face.

These two films are among the most provocative meditations on violence and the spirit of revenge ever seen on screen. We will be screening them at the Festival as a pair with a short intermission between them.

Nijima in *Eyes of the Spider* has just found his daughter's killer and, after a few days of interrogation, kills and buries him. He

returns to his staid domestic life and his loving wife, but their relationship is forever changed. He encounters an old high school friend who brings him into his gang of assassins. For unclear reasons, he is adopted by the bigger boss to carry out an investigation of his old friend. His report ultimately leads to a bloodbath.

Nijima in *Serpent's Path* is helping Miyashita, a yakuza, find the man who serially raped and murdered his daughter for a snuff film. They abduct several gangsters who finger a different colleague for the crime. They bring the various candidates back to a concrete warehouse to extract confessions through torture. When Nijima reveals his motives for assisting Miyashita, our understanding of both films changes completely.

– Noah Cowan



Kyua

Cure

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

JAPAN, 1998

111 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Daiei Co., Ltd.**
 Producers: **Tsutomu Tsuchikawa,**
Atsuyuki Shimoda
 Screenplay: **Kiyoshi Kurosawa**
 Cinematographer: **Tokusho Kikumura**
 Editor: **Kan Suzuki**
 Music: **Gary Ashiya**

Principal Cast: **Koji Yakusho, Tsuyoshi Ujiki,**
Anna Nakagawa, Masato Hagiwara

Print Source: **Daiei Co., Ltd., 1-1-16, Higashi**
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This moody, atmospheric police thriller, with complex overtones of mind control, police brutality and copycat murder was the film that broke Kurosawa outside Japan less than two years ago. It is a perfect introduction to his astonishing ability to stretch genre mandates to accommodate profound philosophical insight.

Detective Takabe is tracking a series of identical murders, committed under the same bizarre circumstances. Corpses are found with a brutally slashed "X" through their chests: the killer remains near the scene of the crime, unable to recall the events that led to the killing. Nothing seems to connect the killings and Takabe becomes increasingly frustrated.

Finally, investigators find a drifter named Mamiya. As he passes through police and forensic custody, a rash of "X" murders follow; Takabe and his psychologist friend, Sakuma, immediately become aware that Mamiya has powerful hypnotic powers.

The "whydunit" part of the story cannot be revealed – it is too fascinating and unsettling. Suffice to say that it builds a thought-provoking epilogue to Kurosawa's central idea here: in a society stripped of all possible traditional guides – from religion to family to politics – the charismatic can exert an all-powerful hold on the minds of those left unanchored.

– Noah Cowan



Do-Re-Mi-Fa-
Musume No
Chi Wa Sawagu

The Excitement
of the Do-Re-
Mi-Fa Girl

Kiyoshi Kurosawa

JAPAN, 1985

80 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Executive Producer: **Susumu Miyasaka**
 Screenplay: **Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Kunitoshi Manda**
 Cinematographer: **Toshihiko Uryu**
 Editor: **Jyun-Ichi Kikuchi**
 Production Designer: **Keiko Hoshino**
 Music: **Harumi Sawaguchi**
 Principal Cast: **Yoriko Dohguchi, Juzo Itami,**
Usagi Asoh

Kiyoshi Kurosawa's first major feature film is difficult to pin down. Its protagonist, a horny university professor, is played by the late Juzo Itami (*Tampopo*), yet the film has nothing to do with Itami's own kooky, accessible comedies. The film was financed as a "pink" film – the soft-core porno that dominates Japan's adult film market – yet the sex is intercut with philosophical speeches and experimental cross-cuts. *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* seems at first to be a distant nephew of Oshima's early work and Godard's Maoist period, especially its leftist politics and radical anti-narrative style. But its theatricality and vivid use of colour, reminiscent of Seijun Suzuki and Kon Ichikawa, utterly confuse the issue.

I dare anyone to give a coherent synopsis of the film. Suffice to say that a girl follows her idol – a music personality – onto the wild campus of a Tokyo university. She encounters orgies, terrorists, protesters and other forms of "education."

Strange as it is, *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* shows a fully-formed, unique talent. And, like the rest of his career, it shows Kurosawa bending and twisting generic forms into entirely new cinematic creations.

– Noah Cowan