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# CLASSIC DRAMATURGY AND ARTISTIC LITERATURE IN FILM (THE CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS OF RUSSIAN DRAMATURGY AND LITERATURE IN THE FILMS OF AKIRA

## **CLASSIC DRAMATURGY AND ARTISTIC LITERATURE IN FILM (The Cinematic Adaptations of Russian Dramaturgy and Literature in the Films of Akira Kurosawa)**

### **Abstract**

The article Classic Dramaturgy and Artistic Literature in Film discusses Russian Dramaturgy and Literature transferred into the Japanese environment in the Films of Akira Kurosawa. The author of the article describes the methods of adaptation that used Mr. Kurosawa to get the trust of filmgoers on the example of three films, «The Idiot», «The Lower Depths», and «Dersu Uzala». However not all the films received positive feedback from critics, but in general they convey the inner attitude of the filmmaker and have the common inspiration of Russian drama. The main principles of Bushido, strong sense of sympathy and compassion, perfect moral dignity, inability to compromise, action of internal faith were shown in most films of Kurosawa. Dr. Zviad Dolidze makes a conclusion that the abovementioned works are significant examples of how the expressive, wise and talented film director masterly could transfer the popular dramaturgy and literature in the cinematographic frames.

**Key words:** dramaturgy, play, adaptation, filmmaking, Japanese cinema

## Introduction

The practice of screen versions of foreign writers' works existed in Japanese film since the silent era. It was a peculiar cultural translation, which became a tradition within the first several decades in the history of Japanese cinema. Among them were the cinematographic adaptations of Russian literary and dramatic classics and mostly their plots have been transferred into the Japanese environment. In the early fifties of XX century already known Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa decided to carry out his old dream by transferring on the screen Fyodor Dostoevsky's popular novel «The Idiot».

During the preparation period, Kurosawa seven times re-read the novel that, as it is possible, to understand more deeply the soul of it, the emotions of the characters. The first part of this film was named «Love and Agony», and the second – «Love and Hatred». The director had transferred action of the novel from Russia in Japan, on Hokkaido and also replaced epoch – from the sixties of the XIX century into the forties of the XX century. Accorded with it, there was renamed the characters too. Kurosawa was encouraged that this project was a great examination for him. He believed that the audience understands his position and said – the film director should not lie and therefore he will get the trust of filmgoers [1, 21p.].

## Methods

As it seems, Kurosawa wanted to make his best film that's why he was strongly involved in his work and desired that the straight photographing of Dostoevsky's novel will be better, but he did not foresee many details and what is the main thing – this novel is more psychological and inner,

but nobody can transfer all of them into the film. Besides he did not want to hear about any free interpretations.

The uniqueness of this project is in the remaking of the place of action. Hokkaido is a familiar and exotic place for Japanese people. The national culture is integrated with the western culture there. It is inimitable in its beauty and architectural style, which are different from stylistic peculiarities of other Japanese islands. Maybe Akira thought that substandard, not Japanese conduct of his film heroes will be acquitted. From the first parts, he vindicated the atmosphere of cold and caused by it the separation from family warmth and amusing unbalance. With that end in view, Kurosawa especially set many close-ups. Because of this film was named as a «Film of Eyes» [2, 85p.].

The cameraman Toshio Ubukata worked extremely. His fascinating angles and effective shadows enriched the expressive side. In one episode he did such maneuvers of illuminating types of equipment that those were moved with actors. But in another scene, Ubukata used one of the assistants as a shadow of the actor. By all of these, he reached the peculiar beauty.

At the rehearsals and in the shooting period Kurosawa spent much time on opening the heroes' characters. His views coincided with the main hero of «The Idiot» that's why he tried to thoroughly show the simplicity of Dostoevsky, the infinite compassion in someone else's misfortune. Masayuki Mori, this surprisingly intelligent actor appeared in such new manner and also in a strange role with interesting spiritual trouble, that he could set an example to other actors emotionally. In contrast to this Toshiro Mifune worked a lot for making his hero more convincing but in many cases, his play was surface and

weak. He had never been good in the roles of selfless lovers what clearly is shown in this film.

In the middle of 1951 Kurosawa prepared the first version of «The Idiot» which lasted 4 hours and 25 minutes, but the film company «Shochiku» decided to reduce it – the film was almost half diminished. Akira was angry but could not do anything. The result was the fact that in «The Idiot» was preserved the overall mood of the literature work but the cutting of some fragments had a destructive impact on the film. That formed many rough passages, specific shortcomings, and disturbances of narrative rhythm. The uneven theatrical constructions were stamped to the common balance of the film, especially in its first part.

Japanese film critics did not like «The Idiot». It was nicknamed as «An ambitious project» [3, 17p.] and was criticized as an inappropriate to the traditional melodrama and radically different from films realized by «Shochiku». In itself «The Idiot» was very personal for Kurosawa. He believed that he made a good film, did everything as he planned and did not share the positions of film critics. Moreover, he was convinced that this film as entertainment had not failed because the filmgoers wrote many letters to him and expressed their support. Kurosawa suggested that «The Idiot» was a new variety of Japanese film melodrama which was understandable for the audience only [4, 27 p.] and for him Dostoevsky was the favorite author, was the one who writes most honestly about human existence, «he seems terribly subjective, but then you come to the resolution and there is no more objective author writing» – declared Kurosawa [5, 21 p.].

## **Results**

This film first time was shown abroad after 12 years. For foreigners who did know neither the creation of Dostoevsky nor the Japanese culture, «The Idiot» was a strange film. The experts noted the low standards of actors, the poetic patterns, the striking manifestations of the writer's spiritual world, etc. In addition, there were some comments about very lengthy narration, the feeble development of characters, and the experiments of old-style shooting technique [6, 36 p.]. The time passed and «The Idiot» reached to the homeland of Dostoevsky. In contrast to the western critics, Russian researchers gave a positive assessment of the film and recognized that this majestic work was the first screen meeting with the real Dostoevsky [7].

The western and the eastern is skillfully combined in «The Idiot». Certainly, the narrative line is non-traditional and it has unexpected ways of plot development. Kurosawa decided to make this adaptation because he felt spiritual and aesthetic compatibility with Dostoevsky. He accented everything on a text and reported and discussed the main problem – the spiritual destruction of the pure human being. In spite of his sincere attempts, the film left the impression of the theatrical performance.

The second film adaptation of Russian dramaturgy made by Kurosawa was «The Lower Depths» (1957) based on the play of Maxim Gorky. In his youth years, Akira often attended Tsukiji small experimental theatre, which worked with the methods of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and Reinhardt. The play of Gorky was in the repertory of this theatre. So Kurosawa wanted to stage this play in theatre but last moment decided to make the film. He changed the epoch and place from Russia in Japan in this project too. He also changed

something in the original of Gorky but left the common inspiration. Kurosawa never liked an idea of one private film star so he presented an ensemble of actors. It was an innovation. The film had not any leading character and consisted of small stories which created the balance for each other and reached the high realism.

Before the shooting, the film group had tiring rehearsals for 40 days. Akira trained the actors in sordid costumes. They had only one exterior and one interior. The actors: Toshiro Mifune, Isuzu Yamada, Minoru Chiaki, Ganjiro Nakamura, and others easily played their parts. It was the great merit of a film director. There is clearly shown in this film an attitude of Kurosawa that social criticism is much less useful than painful research of human depths and desires. Of course, the description of vital complications was one of the main subjects for Kurosawa and that's why he bravely appealed to the creative work of Gorky.

«The Lower Depths» continued the search of Kurosawa: illusion against reality – most of his heroes are in the pincers of illusion and could not deliverance from them. Only the cleric man feels reality. The story is more consistent than the life itself – noted researcher Donald Richie, who named this film as a claustrophobic drama [8, 76 p.].

Kurosawa used Bakabayashi – the kind of traditional Japanese music with flute, drums, and clappers. This is the festive music but the director gave it the opposite reason – by this he wanted to underline the tragic frame of mind, to explain the atmosphere of indignation and anger what took place in the Edo period's Japan by political-economical situations and which were described in the satiric poems and entertainments of those times. Herewith Akira transferred the plot of Gorky's play

in the Japanese flophouse in order to be clear for his compatriots. He was guided by sceneries and dramatic style of Tsukiji theatre, put many theatrical nuances in this film and bound them by comic episodes and phrases for discharging its dynamism. Despite all a foresaid «The Lower Depths» is Japanese only superficial.

### **Discussion**

The film was shown in Japanese cinemas in 1957. Its dynamic camera work and montage, which were extremely equivalent to the severe existence of its characters, emphasized unhealthy situations, an absence of the personal life and the opportunities of escape from that infernal abyss where the heroes live are either a death or a crime. They «fight» against the harsh reality by drinking alcohol. «The Lower Depths» provides a fine example of how the man feeds on dreams and self-deception to make life bearable» [9, 18 p.]. Such circumstances and the final episode had a very oppressive effect on the audience and critics were strictly against the director.

«The Lower Depths» is an experiment of Kurosawa, where the author wanted to clear up how far he could go by describing the uncompromising reality, by his rehearsal methods, by using the several cameras, how he combined the cinematographic techniques and theatrical space, the specificity of theatre with film dialogue and the play of film actors.

After five years this film was distributed abroad. For the most part, it received positive evaluations as a visual magic work [10, 34 p.]. For foreign film critics despite amazing melancholy, it was the best cinematographic translation of Gorky's play. Kurosawa presented the newest, emotional vision of characters who tried to run away from reality, dreamed

about survival, etc. This film is peculiarly the intellectual work what satisfied the filmgoers and raised the thoughts but some researcher considered that this adaptation was more boring than the same play's adaptation made by Jean Renoir and «the hopeless inertia and instinctual folly of Gorky's characters comes over, but it does so inexcusably static cinema» [11, 149 p.].

The fairness demands to mention that «The Lower Depths» as the evidence of the author's determined effort is Akira Kurosawa's only film product which was not properly researched, interpreted and evaluated by critics.

Kurosawa's film «Dersu Uzala» (1975) was based on two stories of Vladimir Arseniev. This project became one of the most successful by its poetic considerations, amazing landscapes, and experimental aspirations. The main character is a distinctive mystical man jointed with nature. Akira had read the novels of Arseniev in his youth and wanted to film these but because of different cases, he could not do it. In 1973 Kurosawa received an offer from the Soviet Union about participating in the new film project as a director and to select the subject himself. He decided to film those stories and found the book of Arseniev for reading it once again.

«At first you need to carefully interpret the novel and then transfer it to the screen. Some people think that the film must be made in accordance with its literary original. I do not think so – in the novel, there is a description of the hero's psychological conditions, but in the film, the hero must to show his feelings by motion and speech. On this exactly is based on the difference between literature and cinematography. In short, I suppose that it is necessary to make important changes in the plot of the novel and then

shoot the film. Otherwise, this film will be unfit» – indicated Kurosawa [12, 19 p.].

The shooting of this Soviet Union-Japan jointly made work began in May of 1974. The director worked in a new manner. This film should have been poetic, intimate one about the unity of human and nature, about the harmonious relations between them. Akira especially did not make accents on the dramatized narration and preferred the adventure plot. The film is dedicated to the cognitive opposed, superficially different from each other two persons, to their sincere friendship and to the surrounded them space.

The shooting lasted for a long time. Every day the shooting group spent many hours for expressive determination of the frame, for its plastic improvement. Kurosawa did not like the filmmakers who issue the necessary orders before the shooting and then go to speak with journalists. He did everything himself, carefully observed every detail, and specified all locations, found more interesting places, exclusively worked with actors. The dramatic composition of this film did not allow him the opportunity of describing and showing every character properly. Though he simply talked about how he sees any scene, never called the actors to play in clear frames, but asked to impress the individuality and to act freely.

The weather had prevented from completing the work. In October when suddenly came the snow and the season changed to winter, Kurosawa gazed out of his hotel window at the thickly falling snow and sighed, «I feel just like Napoleon» [13, 98 p.]. He was forced to change the shooting plans which led the new challenges.

«Dersu Uzala» became the important indication in the creation of Akira Kurosawa. It is a story about a simple and

tidy man who lives in nature as an integral part of it. He perceives everything in nature and by his own ways fights for saving it. At the same time, this film is a protest action against the current ecological disasters in the world. Kurosawa by this position wanted to inform everyone about the care of nature. The second topic of the film is a friendship and it is established by a common interest – by the love of nature. Those two subjects «Human and Nature» and «Human and Human» run through the film and give it real greatness and genius.

### **Conclusion**

Kurosawa as a descendant of samurai had many features which were characterized for the representatives of this class: The strong sense of sympathy and compassion, perfect moral dignity, inability to compromise, the action of internal faith. All of these were coming from the Bushido – the code of ethics. In general, the main principles of Bushido were shown in most films of Kurosawa and maybe it is wonderful for someone these are shown in «Dersu Uzala» too. By his example of living, the main hero answers one of the rules of Bushido – «Face both man and nature and learn». Although he is not a samurai, but an ordinary hunter. By Dersu Kurosawa created a character who shows an innocent face of life, human harmony with nature and herewith recognizes how small and powerless is a man against nature. «His ethical code and his way of life are indeed identical» [14, 159 p.].

The film was demonstrated in Japan from August 1975. Japanese audience liked it very much. The same time «Dersu Uzala» was presented at the Moscow International Film Festival where it won the first prize – the Gold Medal. Next year

it won the other, more high-level prize – Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film. In 1977-1978 the film and Kurosawa were awarded by several European prizes. Akira declared that he wished to receive resembling honorary awards for a film made in Japan but unfortunately Japanese producers were not too eager to invest a lot of money for such production [15, 29 p.].

Because of the great successes of «Dersu Uzala» in the international arena, many Japanese critics who never liked the films of Kurosawa changed the politics and praised his last work. Akira was in the heyday of fame. He felt new energy and a deep faith in the future. By making this adaptation he confirmed that using the foreign materials he could create the film what was the clear displaying of Asian philosophy and art. In the conversation with film critic, Judy Stone Akira had stressed that human beings must be more modest toward nature because we are the part of it and need to exist with it more harmoniously. If nature is destroyed we will be destroyed too. So we can learn a lot from Dersu [16, 56 p.]. Hence it is clearly shown that this character was one of the favorites of Kurosawa, the splendid statue of his imagination and sensitivity.

All above-mentioned works were the remarkable translations of foreign, in this case, Russian dramaturgy and artistic literature into the films of Akira Kurosawa (it is broadly known that this man also made the fascinating cinematographic adaptations of William Shakespeare plays). They are the significant examples of how the expressive, wise and talented film director masterly could transfer the popular dramaturgy and literature in the cinematographic frames. That's why Akira Kurosawa is internationally well known as a great filmmaker and an excellent artist.

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## **КЛАССИЧЕСКАЯ ДРАМАТУРГИЯ И ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА В ФИЛЬМАХ (Кинематографические адаптации русской драматургии и литературы в фильмах Акиры Куросавы)**

### **Аннотация**

Статья Классическая драматургия и художественная литература в фильмах рассматривает русскую драматургию и литературу, перенесенные в японскую среду в фильмах Акиры Куросавы. Автор статьи описывает методы адаптации, к которым прибегал г-н Куросава, чтобы завоевать доверие зрителей, на примере трех фильмов: «Идиот», «На дне» и «Дерсу Узала». Хотя не все фильмы получили положительный

отзыв от критиков, в целом они передают внутреннее отношение режиссера и сохраняют общий дух русской драмы. Основные принципы Бусидо: чувство сострадания, высокая нравственность, непоколебимость, внутренняя вера показаны в большинстве фильмов Куросавы. Звиад Долидзе приходит к выводу, что упомянутые фильмы являются примером того, насколько мастерски выразительный, мудрый и талантливый режиссер может передать знаменитые

**Ключевые слова:** драматургия, пьеса, адаптация, постановка, японское кино

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### **ФИЛЬМДЕРДЕГІ КЛАССИКАЛЫҚ ДРАМАТУРГИЯ ЖӘНЕ КӨРКЕМ ӘДЕБИЕТ (Акира Куросава фильміндегі орыс драматургиясы мен әдебиетінің кинематографиялық бейімделуі)**

#### **Аңдатпа**

Аталмыш мақалада Акира Куросаваның фильмдерінде жапон ортасына алып келінген орыс драматургиясы мен әдебиеті қарастырады. Мақала авторы көрермендердің сеніміне ие болу үшін Куросава қолданған бейімделу әдістерін үш фильм негізінде сипаттайды: «Идиот», «На дне» және «Дерсу Узала». Фильмдерінің барлығы дерлік сыншылардан оң пікірін ала қоймаса да, ол фильмдерде режиссердің ішкі көзқарасы мен орыс драмасының жалпы рухы сезіледі. Бусидоның негізгі принциптері: жанашырлық сезімі, жоғары адамгершілік, табандылық, ішкі сенім Куросава фильмдерінің көпшілігінде көрсетілген. Звиад Долидзе аталған фильмдер дана, әрі талантты режиссердің танымал драматургия және әдебиет туындыларын кино тілінде қаншалықты шебер жеткізе алатындығына мысал болатындығы туралы ой түйеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** драматургия, пьеса, бейімдеу, қойылым, жапон киносы

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