

JYX



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Huttunen, Miia

Title: Five Kurosawas and a (de)construction of the Orient

Year: 2020

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © The Author(s) 2019

Rights: In Copyright

Rights url: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

Please cite the original version:

Huttunen, M. (2020). Five Kurosawas and a (de)construction of the Orient. *Politics*, 40(3), 281-294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395719883759>

Five Kurosawas and a (De)construction of the *Orient*

Abstract

In 1959, UNESCO published a catalogue of Eastern films suitable for Western audiences, titled “Orient. A Survey of Films Produced in Countries of Arab and Asian Culture”. The aim of the catalogue was to familiarise Western audiences with Eastern cultures through cinema. The catalogue lists seven general characteristics of Eastern cinema to distinguish it from its Western counterpart and to provide ready-made interpretations of the essential characteristics of the Eastern world. Of the 139 feature films listed in the catalogue, five were directed by Kurosawa Akira – the biggest number of films by a single director. This article provides an analysis of the five Kurosawa films within the frame provided by the characterisations in the catalogue in the political framework of World War II and its aftermath. Reading the cultural differences listed in the catalogue as a means of constructing the East in Western eyes, the article suggests UNESCO’s world was defined neither in terms of the contemporaneous geopolitical polarisation of the Cold War nor the ongoing decolonisation process. Instead, the catalogue served the purpose of proposing a cultural intervention in geopolitics, providing a reimagining of political realities constructed on a cultural basis and given a concrete form through cinema.

Keywords: the East, cinema, UNESCO, Kurosawa Akira, Cold War

Introduction

As Paul Virilio has taught us, the history of cinema is intimately wrapped up with the history of war (Virilio, 1999). Indeed, from propaganda to surveillance technologies, and from representation to perception, the history of the two runs in parallel. Or, as Roger Stahl phrases it, “the line between war and entertainment has always been permeable and negotiable” (Stahl, 2010: 4). The conduct of war and peace itself is becoming dependent on visual media’s aid in comprehending and representing our world, resulting in a co-constitutive relationship between geopolitics and visual culture (MacDonald, et al., 2009). Film, however, also holds a critical promise for a disruptive intervention in our

traditional models of political thinking, ones rooted in nationalist geopolitics and the antagonist policy making that follows (Shapiro, 2009).

This article looks at an instance when cinema's disruptive powers were summoned to serve as an instrument for a radical reimagining of world affairs in the post-World War II world. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the number of international organisations grew exponentially. This was due to a shared belief that it was finally time to move past the antagonistic nationalism that had led to the world scale conflicts defining the first half of the twentieth century. UNESCO, especially, stood out as a vanguard of the idealistic post-war endeavours to stretch the realm of state-centred multilateral diplomacy to the spheres of science, education and culture. Indeed, as Akira Iriye notes, "In those days, no international organization better exemplified the renewed faith in worldwide cooperation than the United Nations, Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)" (Iriye, 2002: 44).

The standard narrative of what followed describes the short period from 1945 to the beginning of the Cold War as the height of the optimism held for the role of these organisations, only to fall flat as the fall out between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. forced the hopes of multilateral diplomacy to give way to the realpolitik of the bipolar Cold War conflict (Sluga, 2013). However, as Akira Iriye has argued, far from powerlessly observing the conflict from the sidelines, international organisations became "actors in the Cold War drama" (Iriye, 2002: 65). Thus, I look at UNESCO as an active contributor to the construction of the international system, suggesting that initiatives taken to

improve international relations outside the Cold War geopolitical framework assured the liberal internationalist hopes for peaceful cooperation remained alive and well.

In 1959, during the ideologically heated stage of the Cold War and at the peak of the decolonisation process, 139 feature films produced in UNESCO's Eastern Member States were chosen to represent the Eastern world to the West in a film catalogue titled *Orient. A Survey of Films Produced in Countries of Arab and Asian Culture*, published by UNESCO in cooperation with the British Film Institute. As the project was aiming to promote intercultural understanding, films “dealing with sources of international misunderstanding” were omitted (Holmes, 1959). This meant avoiding any references to the recent war and, one would assume, the geopolitical turmoil that followed. The catalogue does, however, contain films where such references are not difficult to detect – most notably five films directed by Kurosawa Akira. These included: *Walkers on Tigers' Tails* (Tora no O o Fumu Otokotachi, 虎の尾を踏む男達 1945); *Rashomon* (Rashōmon, 羅生門, 1950); *Living* (Ikiru, 生きる, 1952); *Seven Samurai* (Shichinin no Samurai, 七人の侍, 1954); and *The Throne of Blood* (Kumonosu-Jō, 蜘蛛巣城, 1957).

Despite the “underlying similarity” of Eastern and Western cinema, the catalogue points out that, to Western viewers, some of the film content will seem incomprehensible due to cultural differences, such as manners, customs and social behaviour (Holmes, 1959). These differences are represented as an obstacle for achieving intercultural understanding between the East and the West. During the times of the catalogue, both the Cold War and

the ongoing decolonisation process ensured that the East-West paradigm remained central to UNESCO's understanding of world affairs. Following Michael J. Shapiro, this article turns to film as a cultural medium perhaps most exemplary of the ways popular culture can generate alternative geopolitical worldviews (Shapiro, 2009), proposing an alternative to the traditional black and white conception of world politics in the 1950s. Just as understandings of the realities of the Cold War world were partially constructed upon cultural products (see e.g. Sharp, 2000), so were its alternatives. This article thus explores the promise cinema holds in its capability to shape the conditions for the perceiving of alternative political realities.

The catalogue provides a seven-point list of general characteristics of Eastern cinema, ranging from the way love is depicted to the representations of violence, derived from the films in the catalogue. Thus, meaning for Western audiences is created not only through the films themselves, but also by the ready-made, culture-specific interpretations of the East. Following Paul Ricoeur, the categorisations provide one possible way of interpreting the films and so, the messages the films communicate are created in an interplay of alternative readings piled one on top of the other. While every text must be read at least partially in the context in which it was produced, the mediation of texts decontextualises them, and every interpretation is another recontextualisation. This allows for new levels of meaning to be added, which then act in a conflict of interpretations. Meaning is not to be found hidden behind the films, but in front of them: Meaning lies with the interpreter, constructed through interaction between the interpreter,

the object of interpretation and the context within which the interpretation takes place.
(Ricoeur, 1976)

Kurosawa's Orient

The Orient catalogue introduces 139 feature films from 13 countries: Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Korea, Malaya, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Tunisia, the United Arab Republic and the U.S.S.R.. The catalogue was distributed in 3000 copies to organisations such as the National Commissions for UNESCO, film distributors and television stations with the aim to stimulate “the presentation of films which might give audiences in the West a fuller and more informed idea of the ways of life of Eastern peoples” (Holmes, 1959). This provides an intriguing starting point for analysis. Firstly, the world is divided into two along a line separating the East from the West. Considering the geopolitical realities of the time, one might be inclined to interpret this as a reference to the Cold War East-West division. The catalogue's world, however, was not structured along those lines. Among the countries with the biggest number of films are countries from the opposite sides of the Cold War polarisation: Japan and the U.S.S.R.. For its first decade UNESCO had remained a primarily Western European organisation and, perhaps to do with the absence of the Soviet Union, the geopolitical division of the Cold War was hardly visible.

The Soviet Union finally joined UNESCO in 1954. By that time, another form of the East-West division had started to emerge in the UNESCO context. The discussions in the UN General Assembly of 1952 focused on the decolonisation process, adding to and

partially replacing the Cold War tensions (Bell, 1953). Now, the definition of the East was drastically different from that of the Cold War. It was no longer the Soviet Union and its satellites but, instead, the non-European, namely Asian, Arab and to a certain extent the Latin American, world. This marked a shift within the whole UN system, as the set-up now was that of the West and the Third World. In the catalogue alike, keeping Japan and the U.S.S.R. company in the top three contributors of films is India, an ex-colony.

While the catalogue carries implications of both the Cold War, and the West and the Third World divisions, it follows purely neither structure. The Orient project was carried out as a part of UNESCO's *The Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values* (1957-1966). Within this frame, the UNESCO Secretariat considered as Eastern "all non-European cultures, particularly those rooted in Asia and fashioned by an ancient, written tradition" (UNESCO, 1957). The fluid way of drawing the East-West border suggests that UNESCO recognised it was treading on politically problematic and unstable ground.

Secondly, the films can introduce to the West the ways of life of the East. The films in the catalogue were selected based on three criteria: 1) They have been shown or received awards at international film festivals; 2) They have enjoyed box-office success and wide distribution in their own country; or 3) They are of historical importance in the development of cinema in the country concerned. Suggestions for films were solicited

from the representatives of the countries in question, while the National Commissions for UNESCO had the final say.

Out of the 139 feature films, 37 were Japanese. These can be categorised into two groups. The first category, *jidai-geki* (時代劇) or period dramas, tells stories of the heroes, legends and myths of old Japan. Usually taking place during the Edo period (1603-1868) and often based on folk tales, they depict traditional Japanese customs. The second category, post-war *shomin-geki* (庶民劇), depicts modern Japan. It focuses on the struggles and aspirations of common people and is characterised by the tension of traditional values clashing with societal changes.

By the publication of the catalogue, Kurosawa had directed 19 films and thus, about one in four of his films were seen fitting to familiarise Western audiences with not only Japanese, but Eastern cinema as a whole. The collection of five films is the biggest number of feature films by a single director in the catalogue. The Kurosawa films selected for the catalogue represent different political contexts of 1940s and 1950s Japan: *Walkers on Tigers' Tails* is a wartime film; *Rashomon* and *Living* are from the Allied Occupation period (1945-1952); and *Seven Samurai* and *The Throne of Blood* represent the immediate post-Occupation era. As the political conditions changed, so did the conditions of filmmaking along with the not always subtle references to societal issues in Kurosawa's films.

Breaking down the Categories

In what follows, I read the five Kurosawa films in relation to the list of seven key differences between Eastern and Western cinema distinguished in the catalogue: 1) struggle, 2) love and sex, 3) courtesy in human relations, 4) violence, 5) sentiment and emotion, 6) music, song and dance, and 7) the role of women. Winifred Holmes of the British Film Institute was in charge of compiling the catalogue. The categorisations are thus primarily hers – they do, however, carry UNESCO’s blessing.

Struggle

The catalogue’s list opens with the *emphasis on struggle*, of which *Rashomon* stands out as a textbook example. It was released in 1950 in Japan and while it was a box-office success, the Japanese critics were not impressed. A year later, the film premiered at the Venice Film Festival, winning the Grand Prix followed by critical acclaim throughout the West. The Japanese were puzzled. The reasons behind the film’s success in the West were attributed to either its exoticism or the fact that it was Western enough in style. More generally, when praised, Kurosawa is mentioned equal to legendary Western filmmakers; when criticised, he is placed in opposition to other masters of Japanese cinema, such as Ozu Yasujirō or Mizoguchi Kenji¹, for not being Japanese enough. Kurosawa responded by a simple “Oh, I’m Japanese all right” (Richie, 1970: 197). “I don’t think I’m Western at all. [...] I feel that among Japanese directors today I must be the most Japanese” (Yakir, 2008: 74). Thus, for Kurosawa, Japan was a member of the Eastern world – that is, assuming his world consisted only of two halves.

¹ Ozu was featured in the catalogue with 1 film and Mizoguchi with 4.

Under the ruined Rashōmon gate in 11th or 12th century Kyoto, three men take shelter from the rain. Two of the men, a woodcutter and a Buddhist priest, have spent the morning at a trial, leaving them deeply disturbed. A bandit, Tajomaru, had been brought to justice as a suspect in a murder case. The story takes place in times of civil war, when human life has little value and, as the priest explains, people are killed like insects. The priest verbalises the pessimism of the characters: “War, earthquake, winds, fire, famine, the plague. Year after year, nothing but disasters.” This brings to mind another time in history when Japan was brought to its knees by hunger and hardship: the post-war years. On the 15th of August 1945, Emperor Hirohito addressed the Japanese nation in a radio broadcast. His message was short and simple: Japan had accepted the Potsdam Declaration, which demanded Japan’s unconditional surrender and ended World War II. Following Japan’s surrender, Allied – in practice primarily American – forces were set up to supervise the Occupation, aiming for the democratisation of Japan.

Like in *Rashomon*, looking for the guilty party was a burning issue in the post-war world. In the spring of 1946, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East gathered in Tokyo to bring Japanese war criminals to justice. Emperor Hirohito, however, was not to face the court, following the advice of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur². Hirohito was regarded as a symbol uniting the Japanese people and thus, putting him on trial might have had drastic consequences. In reality, the Japanese were ready for political and social change and so, the Occupation’s political mission of democratisation sat well with them. They were not only ready to

² SCAP refers to both General MacArthur and his successor Matthew Ridgway, as well as the whole institutional apparatus of the Occupation.

discard the legacy of the wartime government but had already shown interest in establishing democracy before the war (Kawai, 1960: 34-50). Maintaining the status of the Emperor was thus not a priority for the people struggling with poverty and famine. More likely the Emperor became a means for the U.S. to secure an ally for the future.

“There is a greater emphasis on the struggle for existence, both in town and country, in oriental films” (Holmes, 1959), the catalogue states. The underlying struggle portrayed in *Rashomon* is the struggle for truth. In his testimony, the bandit Tajomaru explained he had come across a couple and was drawn to the wife’s beauty. He decided to have her, even if it required killing her husband. He lured them into a grove and tied the husband to a tree. Of what happened after, we are told four different versions. In Tajomaru’s version, he killed the husband at the wife’s insistence, following what may or may not have been rape. The wife fought fiercely for her honour, but eventually consented. In the wife’s version, she asks her husband to kill her now that she has been disgraced. She faints and wakes up to find her husband dead, with her own dagger stabbed through his chest. The husband, through a spirit medium, explains he could not live with his shame and killed himself with his wife’s dagger. Thus, *Rashomon* turns into a cynical story of relative truths.

”Who can we trust to tell us the truth” is of course an important question to ask in any political context. In post-war Japan it was perhaps even more topical, as the Allied Occupation forces’ first formal directive on “freedom of speech and press”, issued in September 1945, had explicitly declared that “there shall be an absolute minimum of

restrictions on freedom of speech” as long as they would stick “to the truth” (Quoted in Dower 1999: 406-407). The truth, now, was dictated by the Occupation forces. “Lies, all lies”, the woodcutter repeats and reveals that he witnessed the crime. He tells a story resembling Tajomaru’s version and for a moment we believe the truth has finally come out. Instead, it transpires that the woodcutter had stolen the wife’s dagger, implying that his story was not entirely honest either, thus making us question whether we should trust his story any more than those of the others.

Love and Sex

Next, the catalogue points to the attitudes towards *love and sex*. Love, let alone sex, is not a theme frequently explored in Kurosawa’s films. *Living*, however, is a notable exception. It tells the story of Watanabe Kanji who is diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer. Watanabe is a widower, living together with his son and daughter-in-law. Watanabe explains that everything he has done, he has done for his son, but has not been present at the most critical points of his life. Now, the two are estranged, and the son is more interested in his father’s pension than his wellbeing. Thus, Watanabe conceals the truth about his crumbling health. Reflecting upon his death sentence, he realises he has never truly lived. For the first time in his life, Watanabe takes a sick leave and dives into the exuberance of night time Tokyo. A novelist leads drunken Watanabe through a night of gambling, nightclubs and predatory prostitutes. Drinking, dancing and pachinko provide only a short-term escape from the painful realisation of his own mortality.

“Love is treated more tenderly and reticently and sex seldom exploited as such” (Holmes, 1959), the catalogue claims. In *Living*, too, the possibility of sex serves a higher purpose:

The slightly misguided night of exploration turns out to be the most meaningful adventure of Watanabe's life. He bumps into Toyo, a young girl who has been working at the City Hall, where Watanabe has done his life's work as a petty bureaucrat. Charged with unprecedented determination and lack of concern over what is expected of him, he is reminded by Toyo, that there is still time to do one good thing before he dies. He remembers a group of local women being transferred from counter to counter in a futile quest to find a bureaucrat brave enough to respond to their demand of turning a bit of wasteland into a park and finds meaning for what little time is left for him. After Watanabe's death, his family and colleagues are thoroughly confused about the motives behind his altruistic deed: Was it seeking for glory, or the influence of an assumed mistress, or was it perhaps to do with him knowing he had cancer. They argue about who should get the credit for the accomplishment as it definitely is not the deceased – his department was not in charge of building parks.

Living is a film about loneliness, universal humanism and hope. Following the work of Donald Richie, the discourse on Japanese cinema in the West has long been labelled by humanist criticism, where the gap between the universal values portrayed in the films and the exoticism of Japanese cultural particularity was filled by "humanity" (Yoshimoto, 2000: 10-11). If we were to continue in this vein, one could argue that the categorisations of the catalogue only covered a part of the ground they were aiming to map. We could, in addition to the seven differences distinguished in the catalogue, detect other unifying themes as a means of constructing the East, such as universal humanism, hope for a better future and trust in the goodness of mankind.

Living is also a film about strongly caricatured bureaucracy, rigidly bent on not making any useful decisions on any sensible matter. The film places the public institutions and civil service in a rather ridiculous light, hinting that the bureaucratic problems faced by common people are tied to the new political system imposed by the Occupation. The group of women on a mission to build the park make this perfectly clear: They question the existence of democracy, responsible for the bureaucratic carousel they have been taken on a ride on. During the Occupation the power set-up had been completely turned on its head as the ex-imperial power was forced to adjust to the reorganisation of its society from the outside. With the arrival of the Occupation forces, despite their noble goals of establishing democracy, the Japanese people were condemned to another six and a half years of authoritarian military rule. In a strict sense, the Occupation did not constitute a military government, but functioned as a superstructure over the existing Japanese government. While officially the role of the Occupation was to supervise, assist and advice, in practice it was clear who held the highest authority when it came to the reforms. Thus, from the Japanese perspective, while different to the war time ones, the rules were still dictated from above. The film industry with its new rules of censorship exemplifies this perfectly. And, as we can see from *Living*, these developments did not go uncriticised.

Courtesy in Human Relations

The catalogue continues with *courtesy in human relations*. *Walkers on Tigers' Tails* is based on a kabuki – a classical Japanese theatre form – play *Kanjinchō*, which in turn is based on a famous noh – another form of classical Japanese musical drama – play *Ataka*. It is an adaptation of a well-known 12th century incident. Minamoto no Yoshitsune, one

of the most famous samurai warriors of all time, has led his troops to victory against the rivalling Taira clan. Yoshitsune's half-brother, shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo, perceives him as a threat and orders him to be captured. The escaping Yoshitsune and a group of six samurai disguised as monks are joined by a silly little porter who guides them to a frontier post set up to capture them.

The film was hailed "mysterious and beautiful" by Western critics, the catalogue advertises. There is no mention of the reactions of Japanese critics to the film, perhaps to do with the events surrounding the film's release. The film was examined according to The Motion Picture Law of 1939, which had established state authority over the film industry and subjected films to strict censorship. The Stan Laurel like character of the porter does not appear in *Kanjinchō*, the overall structure of which Kurosawa based the script on. The censors found the inclusion of a known comedian to be "a mockery" of a classic kabuki play (Kurosawa, 1983).

The film was released in September 1945, when the Allied Occupation of Japan was already in full swing. Without delay, the Occupation forces began their project of popularising their political agenda of establishing democracy, including dictating a new set of rules for the film industry and dismissing the censors. Officially the Occupation forces promoted freedom of speech and emphasised ending government control over media, while simultaneously constructing an excessive bureaucratic machine to carry out their own censorship in secrecy. The Japanese censors failed to submit the file on *Walkers on Tigers' Tails* to the U.S. Army's General Headquarters (GHQ), who thus

banned it as an "illegal, unreported" production (Kurosawa, 1983). In November 1945 *Walkers on Tigers' Tails* was included on a list of Japanese wartime films, which were to be destroyed as "feudal and militaristic" (Dower, 1999: 426). The story does indeed have all the makings of a patriotic, even nationalistic film, depicting traditional values and bowing in respect to the samurai. The film could easily be interpreted as a war-time propaganda film, as the other characters are portrayed in relation to a feudal lord, whose face is kept hidden and position never questioned.

The escaping Yoshitsune disguises himself as a porter and they make their way to the border where they are cross-examined by Magistrate Togashi. If they truly are monks collecting funds, surely they will have a letter of intent, Togashi inquires. Benkei, Yoshitsune's cunning, heroic and devoted chief samurai, pulls out an empty scroll and without blinking an eye reads an improvised justification for their passage. Even after Benkei's monologue, Togashi is suspicious. Benkei is faced with a moral dilemma: Pretending to blame Yoshitsune the porter for the delay, Benkei must beat him to avoid breaking their disguise, at a time, when raising a hand against one's master was considered a grave sin. Finally, Togashi lets them through. Benkei throws himself at his master's feet to apologise for his unthinkable action. Yoshitsune forgives him, revealing his face for the first time.

While *Walkers on Tiger's Tails* was seen by some as a manifestation of nationalistic heroism, from the perspective of the catalogue it speaks of the code of conduct of the samurai: "Courtesy in human relations, even among the very poor or the very tough, is

seldom forgotten” (Holmes, 1959). It is impossible to determine for certain where exactly Holmes’ categorisations of Eastern cinema sprouted from. Furthermore, evaluating the accuracy of the categories proves a challenging task, as due to their universal nature they are almost impossible to argue against. As the categorisations showcase, unifying narrative themes are possible to detect even in the vague “Eastern” of the catalogue, at least as long as one is willing to interpret topics such as courtesy and good manners as a basis for categorisation.

Violence

The fourth category is formulated through *violence*, which is seen to be tied to nationalistic heroism. It is almost as if the catalogue is referring directly to the several samurai films in the catalogue, the most famous among which is *Seven Samurai*. A peasant village harried by bandits decides to hire a group of samurai to protect them. The task is not easy: Fighting for farmers in exchange for food is not exactly in line with the type of work the samurai are accustomed to. Eventually, they succeed in finding a group of seven and the preparations begin.

“Violence usually has a heroic tinge, connected with traditional warrior codes which foster national pride”, the catalogue explains. While reading a samurai film through its depiction of violence makes sense, one of the main themes of the film is people adjusting to changing times – the end of the era of the samurai. Fighting side by side, the villagers and the seven win, but a sense of loss hovers over the surviving samurai. As Kurosawa himself describes the conclusion, “it is the samurai who were weak because they were being blown by the winds of time. They won the battle for the peasants, but then they

were dismissed and went away” (Mellen, 2008: 61). However, it might be less a depiction of an end of an era than a story of the beginning of a new one. In *Seven Samurai*, the fate of the village is decided in an epic battle where different social classes fight side by side for a common goal, vividly bringing to mind the democratisation process of post-war Japan. For the Japanese, World War II had not been a separate conflict. Merged with the Manchurian Incident and the Second Sino-Japanese war, it formed The Fifteen Years War (1931-1945), fought against not only the Anglo-American demons but also the “Chinese bandits” (Dower, 1986: 42). As defined in a secret government report *An Investigation of Global Policy with the Yamato Race as Nucleus*, the wartime propaganda had, in addition to nationalistic ideology, largely been constructed around arguments of Pan-Asianism, but not on equal grounds (Dower, 1986: 263). Instead, it was built on the superiority of the Yamato race in relation to other Asian nations, aiming to rationalise Japan’s political, economic, and cultural dominance to justify their imperialistic endeavours in Asia.

Starting from the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japanese intelligentsia had attempted to find equivalences of the idealised Western civilisation in pre-industrialised Japan. This discourse, as a counterbalance to Westernisation as a civilising phenomenon, was utilised to claim an equal position between Japanese civilisation and that of the West. The counter discourse, built on writings such as Nitobe Inazō’s *Bushidō. The Soul of Japan* (1900), argued that, just like the Europeans and Americans, Japan also had an old, refined civilisation. (Takeuchi, 2010: 41.) The samurai were the embodiment of such a civilisation as in addition to duty, honour and loyalty their code included chivalrous

virtues. The warriors were seen to possess qualities essential to civilisation, as described in the bushidō discourse.

Whether Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* can in any way be read as justifying the catalogue's suggestion of the link between violence and nationalism in Eastern films, remains up for debate. One may, in addition, wonder how well the decision to set focus on nationalistic representations of violence fits together with UNESCO's internationalist nature. UNESCO is, in essence, an organisation of member states, standing for the sovereignty of nation states. On the other hand, it is characterised by its cosmopolitan mission and, at the times of the catalogue, by its attempts to clear space for ex-colonial subjects as equals in the international arena. Thus, in the UNESCO context, nationalism and internationalism walk firmly hand in hand.

Sentiment and Emotion

The catalogue continues with *sentiment and emotion*. *The Throne of Blood* is Kurosawa's take on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Two warriors, Washizu and Miki, are returning to Spider Web Castle after a victorious battle and encounter a witch, who foretells their destiny. Washizu will assume control of a neighbouring fort and eventually become the lord of the castle. Miki will take Washizu's place as the commander of the First Fortress, while his son will take over Spider Web Castle after Washizu's time is through. Part of the prophecy comes true, and Washizu's wife, Asaji, devises a plan to realise the rest. She tries to convince Washizu that Miki and his son must die, but he hesitates as he has decided to name Miki's son his heir. Asaji reveals that she is pregnant and will give Washizu an heir of his own blood, sealing the fate of his friend and bringing

questions of lineage and heritage to the centre of the story. Asaji's child is born dead and Miki's son manages to escape.

In *The Throne of Blood* emotion is represented through a figurative noh mask. Kurosawa felt that "while staring at it, the actor becomes the man whom the mask represents" (Mellen, 2008: 65). Washizu was based on a mask called Heida, the strong and powerful warrior. Asaji, in turn, was based on a mask called Shakumi, the mask of a woman no longer young, torn by her suffering at the loss of a loved one. For Kurosawa, the mask represented a woman about to go mad. "Sentiment and emotion are presented without apology or disguise", the catalogue phrases this particular categorisation.

In the West, it was questioned whether the film was a proper Shakespeare adaptation "because it doesn't use the text" (Brook and Reeves, 1966: 117). What actually separates *The Throne of Blood* from *Macbeth* is that whereas *Macbeth* is centred around questions of choice, Washizu and Asaji are never given that luxury (Davies 1988: 155; Prince 1991: 143-149). Their actions are defined only by destiny. It is precisely being deprived of choice that ties the film together with the post-war years. Even though the 1950s in Japan was a time of growing support for antimilitarism and pacifism, one of the goals of the Allied Occupation had been securing U.S. military bases in the strategically important Pacific region. The beginning of the Korean War in 1950 marked the end of the complete demilitarisation of Japan. Thus, the Occupation forces ensured that Japan would remain tangled in Cold War geopolitics – whether it wanted to or not.

Miki's son leads the attack against Washizu's castle in the final battle and Washizu once more visits the witch. But she mocks Washizu's thirst for blood and power. She promises Washizu will not be defeated in battle until the forest surrounding Spider Web Castle starts to move. Bragging about his invincibility, Washizu announces this to his followers. Next morning, they wake up to see the forest approaching the castle from a thick mist: The enemy has cut it down to mask their attack. Washizu's own men turn on him and shoot him down with arrows.

As *The Throne of Blood* is based on a Western text, utilising it to distinguish differences between the East and the West seems peculiar. The same could be said about Kurosawa's films in general, as Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto argues that they problematise both Japan's self-image and the West's image of Japan (Yoshimoto, 2000). As the catalogue overtly suggests, the categories create a prototype of Eastern film, the coherence of which, however, comes across as rather suspect. The list could then be interpreted as reflecting the relationship of the West to the East. Despite this, the catalogue need not be read as an orientalist text. That is, if our understanding of Orientalism follows the original definition by Edward Said (1978). At the heart of Said's Orientalism lays an ideology of difference, constructing East and West as both internally coherent and mutually exclusive entities through oppositions, which serve to place the East in a subordinate position. Since Said's influential work was published, the radical dichotomisation of East and West has become a self-evident and often automatically applied framework for analysing Western depictions of the East.

The rationale behind the distinction between the Orient and Occident in the catalogue was not to reproduce orientalist discourse, but to provoke critical re-examination of who and what the Orient and the Occident consisted of and on what terms they were to be spoken of. The vagueness of the border suggests an understanding that neither East nor West represented a self-contained monolithic unity. Simultaneously, it brings attention to how our understanding of the world is determined by normative vocabularies and how difficult it is to challenge the binary notions embedded in specific discourses. As Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen have pointed out, we tend to approach the world through a set of uncritically accepted series of geographical myths, which, while convenient, are mistakes based on often groundless simplifications of global spatial patterns (Lewis and Wigen, 1977).

Music, Song and Dance

Number six on the list builds on music, song and dance. This is perhaps meant as a reference to the numerous Bollywood films in the catalogue, but the Kurosawa films also capture this in a more subtle manner. *Walkers on Tigers' Tails* utilises songs not only as a means of storytelling but also as a nod to the theatre tradition the film derives from. As the samurai take camp after safely passing the checkpoint, a messenger from Togashi catches the party and brings them gifts to apologise for his disrespectful behaviour – or perhaps to let them know that their identity was known all along. As the gifts mostly consist of alcohol, they drink and Benkei orders the porter –the representative of the common folk, jovial but lacking in self-discipline – to dance in order to celebrate. “I too will perform a dance before we bid farewell”, Benkei announces, pulls out his folding fan

– the most important prop of noh plays – and sings to the beat of drums. The stout samurai continue their journey, leaving the little porter behind.

Walkers on Tiger's Tails was not released in Japan until 1952 after the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the end of the Occupation period. If the ban was in fact initiated by the wartime censorship practices, this would indicate making a clear break with the wartime authoritarian regime and their censorship policies. If the main censors were be the Occupation forces, including the film in the catalogue was perhaps an even more interesting decision. The post-war Constitution of Japan, drafted under the supervision of SCAP, had come into effect in 1947 and following the new values of democracy and free speech, article 21 forbid censorship altogether. Thus, the existence of censorship could not be publicly acknowledged, leading to censoring the existence of censorship itself.

In addition to Japanese films and other media products, foreign media content was censored during the Occupation as a part of a larger policy to “re-educate” and “reorient” the Japanese (Kitamura, 2010: 86). While the main goal was to spread the values of American style ideal democracy, censorship allowed for the Occupation to keep the Japanese in the dark when it came to the changing geopolitical conditions of the post-war world. For example, any references to the collapse of the victorious wartime alliance or to the emergence of the Cold War were not acceptable (Dower, 1999: 425-426). Perhaps the news reached the Japanese public through other channels but officially, the Japanese existed in a political vacuum created by the Occupation forces. Thus, the inclusion of the

film in the catalogue could be looked at as an attempt to communicate that even though the political ties established during the Occupation era might be difficult to break, culturally Japan was now free to stand on its own.

“In many countries, whatever the subject, music, song and dance are indispensable ingredients for the success of a film, among the cinema hungry, low-paying audiences for whom it is made”, the catalogue summarises its interpretation. Of the seven differences this is the only one pointing out alleged differences in technical execution. Thus, what actually differentiates Eastern cinema from its Western counterpart are minor stylistic differences. As if to underline the fact that some of the differences were, in fact, of a rather artificial nature, the catalogue points out that “Yet, except for religious differences, the strangeness is superficial rather than fundamental”, (Holmes, 1959). As Michael J. Shapiro implies, harnessing the disruptive political power of cinema might, in fact, simply require us to subject ourselves to the ways film can help us envision worlds other than our own. One such way is to open up our political imaginaries to make room for cultural difference (Shapiro, 2009). The main goal of the catalogue, then, seems to have been to lower the barrier for intrepid Westerners to watch an Eastern film and providing tools to better understand what is being displayed on the screen.

The Role of Women

The final item on the list turns to *the role of women*. While at first glance Kurosawa’s female characters seem to lack depth, they play a crucial role in mediating the key messages of his stories. A notable exception is *Walkers on Tigers’ Tails* with no female characters whatsoever, but in the kabuki version Yoshitsune is usually played by a male

actor specialising in female characters – as seems to be the case with the film as well. In *Rashomon*, it is the wife's physical appearance that sets the events in motion, even though all three shape the events that unfold and their different retellings. In every version of the story, the characters are presented as slightly different, everyone depicting themselves in the best possible light. In the wife's story, she is weak, virtuous and victimised, but in the other ones she becomes either a fierce fighter, immoral or even deceitful.

The catalogue explains this category: "The role of the woman as wife, mother, sister or daughter tends to be more important. Far from being a soft, clinging, submissive creature, she has strength, courage and singleness of purpose; and is often the keeper of the moral concepts of her society. Her moral fibre and practical nature are depicted as supporting the man – a dreamer, capable of poetic fancy and quixotic action but liable also to disaster through some form of weakness." Western viewers, including the authors of the catalogue, would perhaps have expected women in the style of Hollywood. The lack of a female character as the target of romantic infatuation and a weak object of masculine protection is perhaps what evoked this description. The historical Kurosawa films simply ignore our expectations of a compulsory female character of a specific, predetermined type. This categorisation is the most detailed among the seven, implying the topic was perhaps close to the author's heart. Winifred Holmes herself was raised in India. Around the time of the catalogue project her own filmmaking career took off, and she made more than a dozen documentaries in the U.K., Afghanistan, Nepal and the West Indies. Later,

she became an advocate of women's rights in the Middle and Far East as the chairman of the Women's Council (Times, 1995).

Seven Samurai also sends an unexpected message through a female character. The film introduces a sub-story of a romantic infatuation between the youngest samurai and a farmer's daughter. Pointing out the collision of the peasant and samurai classes on a personal level, the romance reminds us that despite external conflicts, we are not defined by the social and political conditions that surround us and that even in times of war we can turn to each other for comfort and security. As in *Macbeth*, Asaji is one of the key characters in *The Throne of Blood*. Loyal to the original story, she is the complete opposite to the catalogue's description of women in Eastern cinema, at least if we interpret "strength, courage and singleness of purpose" as positive attributes. Asaji is portrayed as the embodiment of pure evil and instead of maintaining and guarding the moral codes of the society, Asaji becomes the one tearing them down. Thus, Kurosawa's women are not necessarily a positive element of a story. They are active influencers and actors – sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad.

Living provides us with a very practical example of how Kurosawa utilises his female characters as a means of framing the actions of the men. The messenger of a new era and the teacher of the old bureaucrat is a young woman who gives Watanabe the courage to rise against his superiors to get the park built. He should make something, Toyo advises Watanabe, reminding him of the park the neighbourhood mothers wanted built. It is the mothers' wish that gives Watanabe the opportunity to do something meaningful

with his life. In *Living*, the women are dynamic and powerful: Toyo leads her life the way that best suits her, and the mothers get their park. In the end, it is the women who give Watanabe the chance to turn his life around. Following Toyo's example, he does what is likely the first brave act of his life and redeems himself.

Conclusions

The discussion of the five Kurosawa films in the catalogue read against the seven categorisations listed in it exemplifies how cinema can derive its stories and themes from the surrounding socio-political context and how, in turn, our understanding of the world is then constructed upon cinema as a source of meaning making. As Michael J. Shapiro notes, a critical film does not merely articulate a specific drama within a world, but rather a world itself (Shapiro, 2009: 11). In the case of the Orient catalogue, this notion stretches to the ways films can be reinterpreted and repurposed to articulate a world they perhaps never intended to depict. Thus, in UNESCO's Orient project, the cinema of Akira Kurosawa and its reading is implicated in the politics of structuring and constructing the world, while simultaneously enabling critical contestations of those very same structures and constructions.

It is impossible to determine for certain whether constructing the East as a single distinguishable system was a conscious aim of the Orient project, even though that is what they ended up doing in practice. Through the act of constructing the East in this manner, the catalogue not only attempts to explain what these films tell us of the East but also to change the world through enhancing intercultural understanding. Interestingly, it

creates a problem in doing so: The differences are presented as obstacles to this aim. Thus, it would be tempting to question the rationality of compiling such a list in the first place. As the five Kurosawa films seem to simultaneously justify and question separating the East from the West on the grounds of cultural differences, they were perhaps meant to be seen through their ability to reveal the manifold and occasionally contradictory nature of drawing the East-West border in this manner. Furthermore, Kurosawa had shot to international fame in the beginning of the 1950s— a state of affairs well worth exploiting when aiming to lure new audiences into the world of Eastern cinema in an exciting but safe way.

The catalogue displays notable determination to interpret the five Kurosawa films in terms of cultural characteristics, completely disregarding the references in the films to “sources of international misunderstanding”, namely World War II and Cold War politics. Instead, it positions the alleged East-West dichotomy primarily as a question of differences articulated on cultural grounds. The catalogue’s proposed way of structuring the world, therefore, is one where the world order constructed upon the Cold War and post-colonial polarisations gives way to the primacy of the cultural aspect of world politics. The differences thus become an instrument for a cultural intervention in geopolitics through the catalogue’s reconstruction of both Cold War and World War II political reality. UNESCO’s Orient catalogue therefore comes across as a radical reimagining of political realities constructed on a cultural basis and given a concrete form through cinema. Furthermore, the act of distinguishing the East from the West on a cultural basis becomes a reflection of UNESCO’s attempts to justify its own existence –

for if there are no cultural differences, why would we need an organisation dedicated to negotiating between them – and its constitutionally dictated mandate to promote peace through intercultural understanding.

Bibliography

Bell C (1953) The United Nations and the West. (Oct., 1953). *International Affairs* 29(4): 464-472.

Brook P and Reeves G (1966) Finding Shakespeare on Film. From an Interview with Peter Brook. *The Tulane Drama Review* 1 October 1966 11(1): 117-121.

Davies A (1988) *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook and Akira Kurosawa*. Cambridge University Press.

Dower J W (1986) *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Dower J W (1999) *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. W.W. Norton & Company/New Press.

Holmes W (1959) *Orient. A Survey of Films Produced in Countries of Arab and Asian Culture. Prepared by Winifred Holmes for the British Film Institute*. London: British Film Institute.

Howard C (2016) Re-orientating Japanese cinema: cold war criticism of 'anti-American' films. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 36(4): 529-547.

Iriye A (2002) *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kawai K (1960) *Japan's American Interlude*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kitamura H (2010) *Screening Enlightenment: Hollywood and the Cultural Reconstruction of Defeated Japan*. Cornell University Press.

Kurosawa A (1983) *Something Like an Autobiography*. Translated by Audie E. Boc. Vintage.

Lewis M and Wigen K (1977) *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. Berkeley: University of California Press

MacDonald F, Hughes R and Dodds K (2009) Introduction: Envisioning Geopolitics. In: MacDonald F, Hughes R and Dodds K (eds.) *Observant States: Geopolitics and Visual Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris: 1-19

Mellen J (2008) Interview with Akira Kurosawa. In: Cardullo B (ed) *Akira Kurosawa: Interviews*. Univ. Press of Mississippi: 43-66.

Nitobe I (1900) *Bushidō. The Soul of Japan*. Philadelphia: The Leeds and Biddle Company.

Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet (n.d.) *The Constitution of Japan*.

Available at:

http://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

(Accessed 04 July 2019).

Prince S (1991) *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Richie D (1970) *The films of Akira Kurosawa*. 2nd ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Ricoeur P (1976) *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth, Tex.: Texas Christian University Press cop..

Said E W (1978) *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 1995 ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Shapiro M J (2009) *Cinematic Geopolitics*. London: Routledge.

Sharp J P (2000) *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sluga G (2013) *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Stahl R (2010) *Militainment, Inc. War, Media and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge

Takeuchi R (2010) Invention of the West in Japan. In: Miklóssy K and Korhonen P (eds) *The East and the Idea of Europe*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 23-42.

The Times (1995) *Winifred Holmes. Obituary. 20 September 1995.* The Times Digital Archive.

UNESCO (1957) *MAPA/I AC/3 Annex 1.* Paris: UNESCO.

Virilio P (1999) *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception.* Trans. Patrick Camiller. London: Verso.

Yakir D (2008) The Warrior Returns. In: Cardullo B (ed) *Akira Kurosawa: Interviews.* Univ. Press of Mississippi: 67-87.

Yoshimoto M (2000) *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema.* Duke University Press.