



KUROSAWA

A.K.

Notoriously media-shy, Kurosawa gave Marker permission to film the making of *Ran*. As his earlier *Sans Soleil* highlighted, the acclaimed French filmmaker was intrigued by Japanese culture and behaviour. There is some fantastic footage of the shoot that makes this a compelling companion piece to Kurosawa's film, but it's Marker's fascination with the iconic filmmaker that makes *A.K.* such a riveting experience.

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The slopes of Mount Fuji, October to December 1984. Akira Kurosawa is shown at work on exteriors and crowd scenes for *Ran*. The film also sketches his personal history, and looks back (with the aid of video clips) to his earlier films to find clues to the nature of his work on the project in hand. There are also sequences showing the heavily costumed extras preparing, rehearsing, performing and (most often) waiting, and chronicling the production delays caused by the poor winter weather.

Marker organises all this material under a series of tri-lingual chapter headings: 'Battle', 'Patience', 'Speed', 'Horses', 'Lacquer and Gold', etc. The documentary is dedicated to the memory of the veteran sound recordist Fumio Yanoguchi, who died during the post-production of *Ran*. Given Kurosawa's reputation as an intransigent and sometimes tyrannical perfectionist, *A.K.* had the potential to become another *Burden of Dreams*: another documentary about a maverick director with an *idée fixe*, another documentary whose interest surpasses that of the film whose production it documents. There are two reasons why it didn't work out that way.

The first is that *A.K.* is, before anything else, a promotional adjunct to the international marketing of *Ran*: it was financed by *Ran*'s co-producers, starts from the assumption that *Ran* will be the crowning achievement of a distinguished career, and maintains a tone of respect that occasionally shades into almost mystical reverence. The second is that the producers, doubtless wishing to avoid the crassness of most such promotional documentaries, hired Chris Marker to make it. By the standards of the genre (as defined by innumerable American TV specials on the Spielberg generation), *A.K.* is certainly a class act: visually striking, idiosyncratically composed and narrated, even modestly informative. But it should be stressed that it is neither a challenging study of Kurosawa nor the kind of film that one expects from Marker when he works on his own initiative. It does not, in short, transcend the limitations of the genre.

The most surprising thing about the film is that it contains no interview as such with Kurosawa. This turns out to be the sign of a larger reticence; Marker also admits to a nervousness about appropriating a beauty that properly belongs only to *Ran* itself. After a preliminary glimpse of Kurosawa directing Tatsuya Nakadai in a scene in which he keeps fluffing his lines, Marker (in a first-person-plural narration spoken by somebody else) lists the 'tools' that he felt he had at his disposal: his own footage of Kurosawa and his cast and crew on the slopes of Fuji, video clips from other Kurosawa movies, and sound-only snatches of Kurosawa's tape-recorded conversations with his

colleagues. Even the latter fragments of Kurosawa voice-over are anecdotal and discursive rather than incisive comments on *Ran*. Kurosawa touches on his age ('No other film has tired me as much'), on his 'affinity' with horses ('The most beautiful shots are the ones we don't take – of the horses as they're brought out in the early mist'), on the squeamishness of Masayuki Mori during the filming of *Rashomon*, and on the practicality of the old samurai philosophies ('Nothing like today's fashionable zen'). None of this, of course, adds up to the material necessary for a detailed study of Kurosawa or *Ran*.

Knowing Marker's own reluctance to be interviewed and photographed, one is tempted to interpret the film's insistence on keeping its subjects at arm's length as an oblique expression of distance for the 'commercial' side of the commission. Whatever, it leaves Marker free to prowl around where he's happiest: among the extras. Here, he exercises his usual eye for visual incongruities (a University of Toronto sweatshirt here, a mounted samurai deferring to a bulldozer there) and takes his usual delight in studying faces, especially at the moment they become aware of the camera trained on them. One budding samurai, caught in this very position, responds with a disarming burst of Japanese teen-speak and asks, 'Am I cute?' Elsewhere in the film, a group of three slightly older extras, suddenly conscious of the camera's gaze, improvise a scene that seems like quintessential Marker. 'Don't look at the camera!' – 'Well, at least you'll be seen in this film' – 'Yeah, but who's going to know your name?'. Marker clinches the moment by freezing the frame on a silhouette and captioning it 'The Unknown Warrior of Mount Fuji'. This is the undoubted high point of *A.K.*, the moment when it seems closest to being 'a Chris Marker film', partly because it's entirely unexpected and partly because it offers a perfectly valid comment on the ignominy and tedium of being deployed in someone else's scheme of things.

A.K. has one point in common with Dieter Schidor's portrait of Fassbinder at work on *Querelle*: it shows the filming of material that is not seen in the finished film. Around halfway through his film, Marker shows the entire crew of *Ran* pitching in to cut great bundles of pampas grass; on the soundtrack, he reflects wryly that it looks like a harvesting scene from a Soviet movie of the 1950s. The bundles of grass are then meticulously sprayed with gold paint, to be used in the background in a night scene lit by a golden moon. Kurosawa, we are assured, intends in these shots to reproduce the effect of *makie* lacquerware. This material is intercut with shots of Kurosawa waiting and meditating. Judging by the published script of *Ran*, this was for the original Scene 12, in which Hidetora's two elder sons discuss their father's incipient madness as they return to the castle from the hunt. Only at the end of this lengthy sequence does Marker note that the scene was cut from *Ran* during the editing. Naturally enough, this deadpan revelation raises a whole series of questions about Kurosawa, about *Ran*, about the documentary. Equally naturally, none of them is answered.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1986

A.K.

Director: Chris Marker

Production Company: Greenwich Film Production, Herald Nippon, Herald Ace

Producer: Serge Silberman

Associate Producer: Masato Hara

General production manager: Ulli Pickard

Production Manager: Takashi Ohashi

Co-ordination: Hisao Kurosawa

Indispensable: Catherine Cadou

Japanese eye: Yuko Fukusaki

Scriptwriter/commentary: Chris Marker

Photography: Frans-Yves Marescot

Assistant Photographer: Tsutomu Ishizuka, Hiroshi Ishida

Special Effects: Patrick Duroux

Calligraphy: Teishû Murata

Editor: Chris Marker

Music: Toru Takemitsu

Sound Recording: Jun'ichi Shima

Sound Re-recording: Claude Villand

Sound Editor: Catherine Adda

France-Japan 1985

75 mins

KUROSAWA**A.K.**

Wed 22 Feb 20:50; Sat 25 Feb 20:45

Yojimbo (Yôjinbô)

Thu 23 Feb 20:15 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia, season co-curator)

Rhapsody in August (Hachigatsu no Kyoshikoku)

Sat 25 Feb 12:40

Ran

Sat 25 Feb 17:20

Dreams (Yume)

Sun 26 Feb 15:30

Red Beard (Akahige)

Sun 26 Feb 17:25

Dersu Uzala

Mon 27 Feb 20:10 (+ intro by Doug Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager)

Mâdadayo

Tue 28 Feb 18:00

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