

“75 Days to Live”: Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* and *Memento Mori*

*Life is so short,
Fall in love, dear maiden,
While your lips are still red;
Before you can no longer love—
For there will be no tomorrow.*

*Life is so short,
Fall in love, dear maiden,
While your hair is still black.
Before your heart stops--
For there will be no tomorrow.*



Ikiru (“To Live”) (1952) is one of Kurosawa’s best, if not his best. Among other things, the film is a meditation on what life is for and how an awareness of our death should bring the meaning of life into focus. Kurosawa himself wrote, “Sometimes I think of my death. I think of ceasing to be. . . and it is from these thoughts that *Ikiru* came.” By connecting the film to the European and Christian practice of *memento mori*, I am not forgetting that Kurosawa’s own Buddhist culture has its own ways to reflecting on and preparing for death, yet I do think that through Dostoevsky, Kurosawa may have absorbed certain Christian and humanist patterns of reflection.

Exploratory Questions

- How often should we think about our inevitable deaths?
- What philosophy of life should we have in light of our deaths?
- Can one make a positive difference in this world? Why and/or why not?
- Should life be about serving and helping others?
- Is it true that “misfortune teaches us the truth”?
- What would you do if you had a year or less to live?

Content Questions

1. How does the bi- or tri-partite structure of the film shape the way that we come to understand Watanabe and his dilemma?
2. How does the narrator help shape the way we see and respond to Watanabe?
3. What are the moments of revelation for Watanabe in the film? Are some more significant than others?
4. What is Kurosawa saying about the nature of public administration and government?
5. How important are shifting moods to the meaning of the film?
6. How important is memory to the meaning of the film? Watanabe's memories of Miyo his son? The co-workers's memories of Watanabe's stand?
7. Does Watanabe learn anything significant from the artist?
8. What does he finally learn from the young girl Toyo?
9. What is the meaning of the manner of Watanabe's death?
10. Is the ending of the film hopeful or hopeless?
11. Some have suggested that *Ikiru* is a very Dostoevskian film? Do you think there is any truth to that claim?

