



## Akira Kurosawa's "Dreams"

Kelly Bulkeley

The recent release of Kurosawa's "Dreams" revives the faint hope, trampled by a summer's stampede of Hollywood "blockbusters", that contemporary films can still provide lyrical, moving insights into the human condition. Kurosawa's stunningly beautiful movie is a welcome relief for anyone who was numbed by the relentless pyrotechnics of "Die Hard II", who was underwhelmed by the super-hyped "Dick Tracy", or who feels that film-making did not reach its supreme form in "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles". These are all fun movies, to be sure; but Akira Kurosawa's "Dreams" reaffirms the idea that movies can be more than just 90-minute escapes from the summer heat.

Kurosawa's movie is a special treat for people who study dreams. It is always a cause for celebration when an artist of Kurosawa's stature creates a work rooted directly in his dream life. However, the appearance of "Dreams" should also spur renewed discussion on the intriguing question of how to approach a dream as a work of art. Although there has been a good deal of reflection on dreams in literature and in painting, there has not been much on dreams in film. What may we, who study dreams, say of "Dreams" as a dream expression?

There are a couple of approaches we could take that are fairly ordinary and lead to dead-ends, and a couple of others that are more interesting and lead to new areas of discovery. The first, most obvious, approach is to analyze the film for how "dream-like" it is. How well does Kurosawa re-create the experience of a dream in his



movie? The immediate answer is, he does this remarkably well. With Kurosawa's "Dreams" we are far beyond the strobe light and echo chamber school of dream portrayal so common to television and movies. Kurosawa makes extremely effective use of camera angle, color, composition, and sound to produce a living world of dream imagination. The use of sound is especially powerful, with the careful isolation of a bell's tinkling, a flag's rippling in the wind, and bootsteps rhythmically click-clacking in a long tunnel creating just the sort of engrossing, wonder-filled atmosphere so common to dreams.

So it is a genuinely "dream-like" film. Not much more to say on that point. A second approach to the film would interpret it according to some kind of dream theory—Freudian, Jungian, structuralist, Existentialist, etc. There

is quite a literature of such interpretations of dreams in film, and Kurosawa's "Dreams" will undoubtedly be put through the ringer by proponents of each theory. The young boy's curiosity in the "The Fox's Wedding Procession" segment has many Oedipal overtones; "The Weeping Demon" is filled with striking archetypal images; structural oppositions and mediations criss-cross all of the movie's eight segments; and issues of existential hope and despair are prominent in the "Mt. Fuji in Red" and "The Village of the Watermills" dreams.

But this approach, like the first, leads us nowhere fast. Such interpretations are certainly valid, and just as certainly sterile—they tell us nothing we didn't know before. Once we've dissected the film and identified the symbols we expected to find, what's left to ask? As alternatives to these approaches I would suggest a couple of other ways for us to look at Kurosawa's "Dreams". One would be to ask what the film tells us about the experience of dreaming—what features of the film seem most distinctive and how do these relate to what we already know about dreams?

*Continued on Page 2*

### In This Issue:

**Dreams of College Women  
Lateralization and Dream Recall  
Lucid Dreams and OBE  
White Dreams  
1990 Conference Evaluated  
The Multiplicity of Dreams  
Joy and Meaning In Dreams  
Hunt Book Reviewed**



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(Drawing on page 1 by Pieter Brueghel)

## Akira Kurusawa's "Dreams"

Continue from Page 1

This is a question that will, of course, evoke different answers from different people. As I viewed the film I was struck by the prominence of mourning and the experience of loss as a recurrent theme in many of the segments. A young boy tries to understand why an orchard of cherry blossoms he loved was cut down; a military officer agonizes over the spectral return of soldiers who died under his command; and an aspiring artist magically meets Van Gogh, but then loses him and, in an astonishing series of scenes, runs through Van Gogh's paintings looking for the master.

While many dream researchers have studied dreams in relation to specific instances of loss (like divorce or the death of loved ones), no one to my knowledge has considered whether mourning might be a fundamental aspect of the dreaming experience. Could it be a basic function of dreams to help us live with our on-going desires for what we have lost? "Dreams" hints at this intriguing possibility.

The film also offers a thought-provoking portrait of the relationship between meanings that are culturally specific and those that are universally human. On the one hand, the movie is filled with Japanese rites, customs, and symbols, and it's painfully clear that a Westerner is going to miss whole ranges of meaning. But on the other hand, every dream segment deals with some kind of experience that is common to all people, making it equally clear that the movie is not hopelessly opaque and can be understood by non-Japanese viewers. More than any book I've read about dreams, Kurusawa's film forced me to reflect on the challenge of moving among the different dimensions of meaning in every dream. The film suggests, I feel, that every understanding of a dream is partial, but that every partial understanding is still meaningful.

This sort of approach is more interesting and open-ended, I believe, because it invites a dialogue between the viewer and the film. Instead of a one-way analysis ("Is it dream-like?", "Is it Freudian?"), this approach looks for meanings to emerge out of a process of back-and-forth reflection ("How does the film challenge my preconceptions?", "What does the film say to me, and how do I respond back to it?").

Another approach that shares this quality of dialogue involves our responding to the ways other viewers understand the film. What can people who study dreams contribute to the broader discussion about the meaning of Kurusawa's "Dreams"? Do we have anything to say, for example, to the film critics who have reviewed the movie? I think we do. Many film critics have said of Kurusawa's "Dreams" (beyond saying "it's a dream of a film", giving it lots of stars, two thumbs up, etc.) that the final segments are weak: the denunciations of nuclear power and war are too pedantic, too preachy, too simplistic in their "messages"; Kurusawa sacrifices the ambiguous mystery of "real" dreams in order to state his waking life morals.

But such criticism betrays a serious misunderstanding of the nature of dreams, and thus misses an important aspect of the film's power. I have found that dreams are indeed often "simplistic" in their messages; when the meaning of a dream is boiled down to a sentence or phrase, it will frequently appear to be a point that is obvious or trite. But in such cases, all depends on the form in which the dream expresses that point—with the striking imagery, tension, and emotional involvement that dreams so often create, a point that is trite in other settings suddenly hits us in a dream with profound, moving power.

Continued on Page 3



## A Comparison of the Dreams of College Women in 1950 and 1990

Linda Dudley & Michelle Swank

In her book, **Women's Bodies, Women's Dreams**, Patricia Garfield (1988) alludes to "the ongoing debate among researchers about whether or not dream elements change over the years" (p. 29) and to Rupprecht's concern that "Hall's research has been gender-biased as well as gender-conscious" (p. 27). The present study addresses both issues by comparing the dreams of college women, collected and scored by women, with the female norms established by Hall and Van de Castle in 1950.

Five dreams were collected from each of 33 women (average age of 18.5 years) in an introductory psychology course during the spring of 1990. The Hall and Van de Castle method of content analysis (cited in Hall, Domhoff, Blick, & Weesner, 1982) was used for scoring the content categories of characters, interactions, and setting. Scoring of the dreams was performed by the investigator and a female research assistant.

Table 1 shows a comparison of the

results of the content analysis with the norms established by Hall and Van de Castle in 1950. Despite the fact that the two groups of women are separated by 40 years, their dreams mirror basically the same preoccupations:

1. Dream characters remain equally divided between women and men.
2. Dream experiences include, in general, equal amounts of friendly and aggressive interactions with both women and men.
3. Sexual dreams remain relatively infrequent.

A peripheral finding, unrelated to the sample comparisons, was that more sexual dreams are reported before menstruation; however, sexual partners in dreams occurring during menstruation were more likely to be well known to the dreamers.

Women continue to cast their dreams indoors and in familiar places. For the 1990 college women, 43% of the dream actions took place within the dorm room or classrooms, 14% in a

**Table 1. Comparisons of 1950 Women with 1990 Women Across Content Categories.**

	1950	1990
<b>Characters:</b>		
Males	.48	.49
Females	.52	.51
Familiar	.58	.65
<b>Interactions:</b>		
Aggression with Males	.22	.19
Aggression with Females	.14	.14
Friendliness with Males	.24	.27
Friendliness with Females	.15	.21
Sex	.04	.08
<b>Settings:</b>		
Indoor	.61	.61
Outdoor	.39	.39

house. This is consistent with Garfield's (1988) suggestion that "the dreamer places herself in settings that are contiguous with daily life" (p. 28). The findings of this study, like those of previous investigations (Hall, et al., 1982; Riechers, Kramer, & Trinder, 1970), provide strong support for the repetition dimension of dreams (Domhoff, 1990). The fact that women do obtain comparable results with the Hall and Van de Castle system suggests that the criticism of the method as gender-biased is unfounded.

Domhoff, G.W (1990) *The Repetition of dreams and dream elements: A possible clue to a function of dreams.* In: A. Moffitt, M. Kramer & B. Hoffmann (Eds.) **The Function of Dreams.** NY: State University of New York Press, 1990.

Garfield, P (1988) **Women's Bodies, Women's Dreams.** NY: Ballantine Books, pp. 27-29.

Hall, C, Domhoff, W, Blick, K, & Weesner, K (1982) *The dreams of college men and women in 1950 and*

*Continued on Page 16*

### Akira Kurusawa's "Dreams"

*Continued from Page 2*

This, I believe, is exactly the case with the concluding dreams of Kurusawa's movie. Sure, the messages are preachy: nuclear power is nasty stuff, and nuclear war would be a lousy way to go. But to condemn these two segments of the film for lacking the "dreamy" qualities of ambiguity and mystery fails to appreciate the tremendous force of the imagery that expresses the messages. In the first a man vainly waves his jacket to ward off the radioactive clouds that sweep over him, a terrified woman, and two crying children; in the second, we see dozens of mutated humans writhing in eternal agony on a war-ravaged wasteland. Such haunting images are truly the stuff of dreams.

People who study dreams shouldn't be bashful about drawing on their knowledge, experience, and insight when seeing dreams in movies. If we approach them with an openness to back-and-forth dialogues with the films and with other viewers, there is potential for us to learn and also to contribute a great deal to the understanding of others. Kurusawa's "Dreams" is one of the best opportunities in recent years for us to realize that potential.

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