

**BFI Future Film member Freddie Taylor recommends
Ran (1985, dir. Akira Kurosawa)**



As a film for younger audiences, *Ran* is a great comparison to Hollywood hits such as Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (2001) and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which both feature epic action scenes whose scale and energy is part of what makes the films awesome. Spielberg has acknowledged how much Akira Kurosawa's work inspired and influenced his own.

For those who aren't familiar with William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, this film is a great way to get a strong sense of the emotional power of the story. *Ran*'s most obvious comparison to Kurosawa's previous films is its vibrant colour, making the visuals that much more stunning. The visuals certainly give weight to the film's subject, especially the journey of the weakening Lord Hidetora Ichimonji. Roger Ebert said of the Japanese director: "I think there is much of Kurosawa in *Ran*, made when he was 75. He was preoccupied with mortality in his later years." The film's focus is most prominently on the tragedy of Hidetora; you feel emotionally invested in him, helped by an intense performance, while deathly make-up and reddening eyes physicalise his gradual descent into senility and madness.

In terms of the scale of the action, the battle scenes and dynamic movement of the characters and large ensemble are visually striking, while the dramatisation of battle feels completely real. Using only practical effects (real flashes for gunfire, a tumultuous amount of burning arrows flying across the screen, even a moment of painfully close horse-trampling) the action scenes are fully immersive; enriched by a moody score and haunting images of death, it all seems to make you feel close to the reality of battle.

Considering the actual translation of the film's title is 'chaos', there should be no surprise at the intensity of the film's emotionally charged and chaotic scenes that make up most of the film. The audience will be awestruck at the sheer grandeur of the film's visuals, particularly the way Kurosawa has composed his shots. On the whole the film feels very theatrical, after all it is an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

The most striking and noticeable things about Kurosawa's compositions are that they render dialogue avoidable, effectively speaking for themselves. One particular scene in the film where this is at work is when Saburo and Tango are sat together in a simple but beautiful two-shot. Although there is dialogue, the image itself communicates to the audience about the characters' place within the world of the film. There are numerous grand shots and dynamic movement of hoards of galloping cavalry; this is maybe one of the only moments we see a character not atop their horse, in a sense representing the calm before the storm, while establishing these two characters' nature and their imminent journey into exile. Throughout the film you'll no doubt be drawn in by the silence of the many tensely sustained shots and all serving to tell a small story of their own. Appearing so harmonious, when actually under the surface boils dysfunction and struggles of power, they are an effective counterpoint to the 'chaos' of the film.

Another stunning shot that tells a story is at the finale of the film's pivotal battle, which has been waged by the tyrannical Taro and Jiro against their father, who's handed over all of his estate and power. We see Hidetora emerging from a flaming castle tower, descending out of billowing smoke. At the bottom left of the frame are the yellow flags of Taro's army and on the right, the red flags of Jiro's. While being stunningly haunting, we also see what is essentially at the heart of the film's central plot. Two sons have been given power they can't control and therefore tyranny against their father ensues. While the flaming tower and the descent of Hidetora's frail white-robed figure seems to express the explosive eruption of his madness, caused by his own sons' greed.

On seeing the film more than once, Ebert says he "realised the action doesn't centre on the old man, but has a fearful energy of its own, through which he wanders". On seeing it just once I can sort of see what he means. First of all the music plays a significant part in the film's mood, which is dark and brooding; and secondly the vastness of the space which dwarfs even the various armies of the competing lords. Most of all, however, this vastness serves to stage Hidetora's growing madness, almost like it is having an effect on his mind. In one particular scene, where Hidetora looks almost endearing, we see him sat, his hair long and dishevelled, his expression far gone, amidst lush green grass and bunches of white flowers. So far gone, he has become harmless and even pitiful; instead of blaming and shaming him for bringing the tyranny of his sons upon the world of the film, you feel sorry for him in this moment of solace.

Overall, I highly recommend this film to anyone especially for younger audiences. Ran's epic scale and beautiful visuals are a treat for everyone!