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The erased grave of Dersu Uzala: Kurosawa's cinema of memory and mourning

ABSTRACT

Kurosawa Akira's Dersu Uzala (1975) represents one of the director's many attempts to make his cinema into Japan's entryway into the global community of nations. The price of this entry is the acknowledgment as well as forgetting of uncomfortable historical facts. A revisiting of Kurosawa's film, set in 1902–1907, against the historical foil of the two world wars, reveals that this cinematic memorial to a Nanai tribesman silently acknowledges and laments Japan's participation in the extermination of the minority peoples of the Manchukuo state and in the destruction of pre-industrial pan-Asian Siberia. Even if Dersu Uzala can be regarded as a turning point in Kurosawa's career in terms of style, as many critics do to the detriment of the film's reputation, this film is nonetheless equally indebted to Kurosawa's world-view and sensibility of the 1950s–1960s, to which he brings new aesthetic means and political concerns.

KEYWORDS

Vladimir Arseniev
Siberia
Nanai/Hezhe people
70mm
Intercultural
communication

Memory is the most faithful of films – the only one that can register at any height, and right up to the very moment of death. But who can fail to see the difference between memory and that objective image that gives it eternal substance?

André Bazin, 'Cinema and Exploration'

IN THE STEPS OF ARSENIEV: KUROSAWA'S *DERSU UZALA* AND ITS NARRATIVE FRAME OF GRIEF

Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* (1975) has for many years been considered a film marking a decline in the director's creative power. Film scholars such as Joan Mellen and Donald Richie, as well as critics in Japan who had praised his earlier films of the 1950s and 1960s, were disappointed by Kurosawa's Russian film, accusing the director of an exaggerated emphasis on the epic, showy style of the 70 mm format at the expense of thematic substance and depth (Galbraith 2001: 512–5). Only in this decade has a rehabilitation of *Dersu Uzala*, along with his other films of the 1970s, begun. See, for example, *The Emperor and the Wolf*, Stuart Galbraith's double biography of Kurosawa and Mifune:

The critics failed to realize that, like Lean, Kurosawa used the format in a matter quite unlike that of other directors. In 70 mm, *Dersu Uzala* is more intimate than epic. With it he creates mood not, as Mellen states, at the expense of substance, but to draw his two characters closer together and to heighten the reality of the world they inhabit (2001: 515).

But the rehabilitation and re-reading of *Dersu Uzala* deserves to be taken even further than Galbraith's restoration of psychological depth. The epic qualities of the film (as evidenced in format, geopolitical setting and international participation) go beyond the psychological to include political and philosophical dimensions; these should merit our attention now that the global scope of Kurosawa's film-making comes more and more to the fore (Martinez 2009). In the following, I would like to show that even if *Dersu Uzala* can be regarded as a turning point in Kurosawa's career in terms of style, this film is nonetheless equally indebted to Kurosawa's world-view and sensibility of the 1950s–1960s, to which he brings new aesthetic means and political concerns.

Dersu Uzala is a cinematic adaptation of the 1926/1928 memoir by the Russian explorer of Siberia, Vladimir Arseniev, entitled *В дѣбрях Уссурийскаго края*/In the Wilds of Ussuriland and translated into English in 1941 by Malcolm Burr as *Dersu the Trapper*. The film starts where the book ends: in 1910 Arseniev returns to the village of Korforovskaya, where several years before at the edge of the woods he had buried Dersu Uzala, his expedition guide. To his consternation, Arseniev realizes that the development of the village and its growth far beyond its previous borders have swallowed up the grove of cedars that used to mark the gravesite. With the trees cut down and the grave levelled, there is no sign or mark left to record his friend Dersu apart from Arseniev's memory.

In fact, by the end of the story Arseniev describes how after burying Dersu he had sat by the road grieving and commemorating. In writing down this recollection, he adds: 'As in the cinema, all the pictures of our past life together were unrolled before the eyes of my memory' (Arseniev [1928] 1996: 339). By this point in the book, the 'pictures' of Arseniev's and Dersu's adventures unrolling in Arseniev's memory are already familiar to the reader. The book ends with this melancholy farewell not only to Dersu, but also to Dersu's natural habitat, the *taiga*, which is vanishing under the advance of towns, railroads and highways.

Arseniev's earlier and more technical expedition diaries – published in 1912 in the journal of the Russian Far East *Приамурье*/The Amur Region and in 1921 in two books, *По Уссурийскому Краю*/In the Ussuri Region and

Дерсу Узала/Dersu Uzala – had contained scattered and fragmentary episodes involving Dersu. The English-language adaptation *Dersu the Trapper* brings these fragments together and presents a coherent and suspenseful narrative about the two men's meeting and their friendship and adventures in the Ussuri region of Siberia. Seizing upon Arseniev's reference to the cinematic nature of memory, Kurosawa places the explorer's visit to Korforovskaya at the film's very beginning so that the whole narrative can be staged in two long flashback sequences, framed as Arseniev's act of remembering.

The first Japanese translation of *In the Wilds of Ussuriland* (titled after the Russian original's subtitle, 'A Journey Through the Mountains of the Sihote-Alin Region', *Shihota-Arin sammyaku tōsaki*, was published in 1938. Kurosawa discovered the book during the Second World War and began to think of filming it with Japanese actors and with the island of Hokkaidō as a setting, but he abandoned this project as unfeasible. Hokkaidō eventually became the location of *Hakuchi* (1951), Kurosawa's adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, of which *Dersu Uzala* was therefore the major conceptual predecessor and competitor. In 1973, when the Soviet production studio Mosfilm invited Kurosawa to make a film of his choice in Russia, the more than twenty-year-old idea of adapting Arseniev's book resurfaced.

Mosfilm's invitation gave Kurosawa an opportunity to shoot on location in Siberia, in the very region where Arseniev had conducted his expeditions at the dawn of the twentieth century. Most of the characters could stay Russian, framing and bringing out the focus on the Asian protagonist Dersu, a hunter from the Ussuri branch of the Nanai tribe (known to the Russians of that period as the Goldi). Shot in the Russian language with Russian actors and a predominantly Russian crew, this Siberia-based film may seem to have had little relevance and interest for a Japanese audience. The question of Kurosawa's topic appears even more intriguing if one considers that Kurosawa insisted on his commitment to the local audience, claiming, 'I would never make a film especially for foreign audiences [...] If a work cannot have meaning for a Japanese audience, I – as a Japanese artist – am simply not interested' (Martinez 2009: 26).

Although upon the film's release Kurosawa claimed many times that its message is ecological and that modern man has a lot to learn from Dersu in this respect (Stone 1991: 160–161; Cardullo 1992: 180), the director's concern with the protagonist and his grave seems to have much darker, unexpressed roots. Yoshimoto points out that Kurosawa framed the film's narrative in a way that highlights its sense of grief:

Significantly, even at the end of the film, the narrative never comes back to the opening scene of Arseniev's visit to Dersu's grave site in 1910; instead, it concludes with the scene of the burial of Dersu in 1907, when he is murdered by a robber for his expensive rifle, a parting gift from Arseniev. Thus, never reaching a resolution, the film is permanently suspended between the two moments of grief over Dersu's death.

(Yoshimoto 2000: 345)

But what are Dersu and his death to Japanese audiences? We know that the original idea of the film was at odds with Japanese militarism. In a 1981 interview, Tony Rayns asked the film director about the influence of militarism – the national situation in which he entered the film industry – on his cinematic career: 'Do you think your career would have developed differently if the

national situation had been different?’ (1981: 83). In response to this question, Kurosawa described the climate of censorship that doomed many of his wartime ideas:

There was no freedom of expression during the war. All I could do was read books and write scenarios, without having any real outlet for my own feelings. *Dersu Uzala* was one of the ideas that came to me then. Like other ideas, it underwent a process of fermentation and maturing, rather like alcohol. Those ideas exploded once the war was over.

(1981: 83)

Even if a process of fermentation and maturing resulted in the *Dersu Uzala* of 1975 with its ‘ecological’ overtones, the first concept of the film goes back to the moment and motive of Kurosawa’s peak interest in Dostoevsky: ‘the novelist’s era, with social oppression and the destruction of truth under the tsars, [was] a direct analogy to the epoch of Japan’s imperial expansion in Asia and the Pacific, during which [Kurosawa] matured as an individual and an artist’ (Goodwin 1994: 71).

In fact, the platoon of Russian soldiers headed by the officer Arseniev whose task is to map the Russian territory adjacent to Manchuria, first in preparation for the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and then in its aftermath, can be seen as an analogy for the Japanese advance into the neighbouring regions of Manchuria in the 1930s.

The trackless land that Arseniev has to chart and where state borders are still to be marked appears as a pre-modern pan-Asian no-man’s-land where populations of Chinese, Koreans, Manchurians and many Mongolian tribes are equally at home, moving, hunting and trading freely, occasionally clashing in local conflicts. Russians, like the Japanese in their day, unambiguously come to these Asian territories as colonizers (Kopper 1991: 195). They bring to this land ‘civilization’, which means territorial claims with borders, controls and trade taxes. Such mappings and extractions then give the occasion for wars in which colonial interests will clash, with a heavy price paid again and again by the local populations.

This historical background is a powerful subtext, hinted at only indirectly through the Russian characters’ military outfits and Arseniev’s measuring and charting apparatus. The film’s emphasis on the two dates of the expeditions – 1902 and 1907 – projected in bold numerals in 70mm format is difficult to overlook. These dates frame the time of the Russo-Japanese conflict, present as an ominous ellipsis, a silent gap that anticipates the two future world wars to come: wars fought over the same issues of mapping and remapping of conquered territories by the industrialized powers.

DERSU UZALA, THE NANAI

In an interview with Kurosawa, Bert Cardullo articulates the theme of *Dersu Uzala* around the character of Dersu, whose wisdom and knowledge of the ways of the forest are often foregrounded.

[Cardullo:] So one of the film’s themes is man’s harmony with nature – when he achieves it – and how such harmony can only help his relations with other men.

[Kurosawa:] Precisely (1992: 180).

Despite Kurosawa's unambiguous answer, his film sends a somewhat different message.

Kurosawa represents Arseniev's and Dersu's relationship as a symmetrical one with regard to their knowledge and mastery over their respective cultures. Dersu lives in harmony with the *taiga* to the same extent as Arseniev lives in harmony with the city; that is, both know the rules and semiotics of their respective habitats. For example, whereas Dersu shows Arseniev how to read tracks to reveal information about their human and animal makers, or explains that a loop of straw hung on a tree branch means that there is no ginseng in this area, Arseniev reciprocates by explaining to Dersu that one has to pay for the water delivery in the city, or that one is not permitted to shoot a gun in a public space where one can injure people. Conversely, Dersu's knowledge is of no use to him in the city.

Dersu is Arseniev's helper and collaborator in the latter's task of demystifying and mastering the *taiga*. Before meeting Dersu, Arseniev sees the *taiga* exclusively through the prism of his own culture and education. He draws on Goethe's Walpurgis Night, a sample of European mythmaking, to describe the fearsome, discomfiting forest hollow where he and the men bivouac as a place populated by demons and witches. The sudden appearance of Dersu and his conversation lifts the mystery from the woods. Arseniev quickly enlists him as a guide.

The major message that Dersu conveys to the Russians is that they are not just conquering a wilderness but entering into communication with another culture, to which they are blinded by their own ignorance. Dersu makes the *taiga* appear not as nature but as culture; it is this cultural quality that arouses Arseniev's and his soldiers' respect. Dersu's experience and authority are emphasized in Kurosawa's film through the stark contrast drawn between him and the soldiers of Arseniev's troop. Again and again, we see Dersu upbraiding the self-styled emissaries of civilization for their naïve ignorance of the Siberian life and their childish, careless behaviour.

For a character 'in harmony with nature', one would have to look back to the figure of Platon Karataev from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a peasant whom the aristocrat Pierre Besukhov befriends in the prisoner-of-war camp during the war with Napoleon. Platon Karataev mysteriously lacks a past and a locality. He is all round in his face and figure, and speaks almost exclusively in proverbs. Tolstoy portrays him as in close touch with nature and a harmonious part of its pantheistic order. His death is just a quiet disappearance, a fusion with his surroundings, leaving no trace behind. Pierre learns from Platon the wisdom of acceptance of fate and nature, which helps him to resolve his existential search for the meaning of life.

Unlike Platon Karataev, Dersu is an active, complicated and even tragic character, haunted by an uneasy past. One night Arseniev sees him performing a shamanic ritual over a bonfire to calm the spirits of his family who have appeared to him in a dream begging for food. At this point, we learn that he used to live in a village with his wife and children, who died from smallpox. Fellow villagers burnt down the house with his family's bodies inside, and thereafter he became a lone hunter in the woods. From an early moment in the film, when he tells this story to Arseniev, Dersu's cheerful demeanor is overshadowed by death and destruction.

Dersu's relation to nature is not intuitively harmonious but highly rational. It is based on practical knowledge and empirical observation. Yet though it is based on the transmitted experience of the centuries, Dersu's mastery over nature is not absolute. On the contrary, he is always aware of the danger and

unpredictability of the *taiga*. Dersu's respect for nature and everything living comes from his awareness of his limitations. When by accident he breaks a paramount *taiga* taboo by discharging his rifle at a tiger, he begins to succumb to the greater power of the wilderness, so convinced of his transgression that from that moment on he is haunted by visions of doom.

Punishment is indeed around the corner: his failing eyesight gradually robs him of his survival skill as a hunter. After a failed attempt to adjust to city life as Arseniev's houseguest in Khabarovsk, Dersu decides to return to the *taiga*, only to be killed by bandits on his way back: they are motivated by the newest-model rifle given to the hunter by his friend. As if to confirm the law of the *taiga*, these town bandits accomplish the wounded tiger's revenge. Thus, Dersu appears as a classically tragic figure, trapped by his fate like the prototypically Western Oedipus. He first appears in Arseniev's life in the darkness of the night and dies a dark, unnatural death. Dersu's grave, which Arseniev visits, is also the scene of a crime, the very place where Dersu was murdered.

It can be argued that the perception of Dersu as a 'man in harmony with nature' is mostly due to Arseniev's misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the Nanai language. The linguist Johanna Nichols has analysed Arseniev's linguistic depiction of Dersu, concluding that Arseniev's rendition of Dersu's speech mixes a Chinese pidgin Russian with some grammatical features of Tungusic languages spoken in the Sikhote-Alin area – 'the imperative as an invariant finite verb form, *moia* (mine) and *tvoia* (yours) as invariant first and second-person pronoun forms, and lack of case inflection on nouns' (Nichols 1993: 186–7). This type of language is stereotypically associated with Siberian natives in travel literature. In fact, there is no reason to assume that a Nanai native fluent in Chinese, Nanai und Udehe, would speak Chinese pidgin Russian rather than a broken version of standard Russian.

Nichols suggests that Arseniev's representation might reflect the explorer's expectations rather than Dersu's actual linguistic competence (1993: 186). A Dersu who spoke broken standard Russian would no longer be a noble savage from whom Arseniev could expect the guidance of pre-civilizational wisdom, but just a regular foreigner. The token of this wisdom in Arseniev's writing is Dersu's alleged animism. The main evidence for his animism is Dersu's common usage of the Russian word 'lyudi' (people) in reference to animals, things and elements. The word *lyudi* implies a state of being animate and conscious, like people: '*Ryba tozhe lyudi*/Fish is people too' (that is, they are alive, they perceive, they think).

However, the stronger claim made by Arseniev for Dersu's animism is that even inanimate objects are living and conscious in his world. This, according to Nichols, is partially due to a grammatical classification applied in the Nanai language to all nouns to which agency is ascribed in a sentence. In such utterances, the word 'lyudi' is used as a nominalizer in combination with adjectives, meaning 'one' or 'thing'. Thus, when Dersu complains about the loud campfire as '*khudoy lyudi*' (literally 'bad people'), it means 'bad one', 'bad thing' (Nichols 1993: 192–3). Arseniev's overinterpretation of Dersu's language has its goal and meaning in an attempted critique of civilization and elevation of the noble savage. The explorer wants to portray for his educated and cultured contemporaries a way of thinking that reflects man's ancient harmony with nature. This primitive wisdom, it is claimed, is being destroyed by technological progress.

Despite endorsing Arseniev's message about harmony with nature in the interviews, Kurosawa undertakes an important deviation by removing the latter's comments about Dersu's animism. The director stages the scenes so

that the language of Dersu appears to be paramount in the film, but he lets it stand on its own without an omniscient explanation. The real meaning of Dersu's world-view stays always somewhat remote and is left to the viewer's own interpretation. Viewers can never be sure whether Dersu's language is a direct expression of his beliefs or just constitutes an attempt to make himself understood by the Russians whose ignorance of his natural habitat is such that he has to point out reproachfully: 'You are like children, live *taiga* – die soon!'

Whatever is behind Dersu's language, the message comes across to his Russian interlocutors as well as to the film audience as an expression of wisdom and consideration for the other, be it humans, animals, plants or elements. But at the same time, one is always aware that this impression is conveyed through a linguistic incongruity. Dersu's supposed 'animism' recalls an ancient way of thinking that the representatives of civilization, too, might have shared in the times long past, but have since thoroughly forgotten. Only an uncanny encounter with this Asian nomad can bring it back to mind in an age when civilization has approached the point of self-destruction.

The threat of self-destruction was different in Arseniev's age – the time of the beginnings of militarism – and in 1975, when Kurosawa extends the old anti-militarist sensibility to the cultural and technological warning of the impending ecological catastrophe:

People today have forgotten that man is a part of nature and, as a result, they are rapaciously destroying their natural environment. The air is becoming unbreathable, and, in twenty years or even less, Japan will be an unfit place to live. We are on the eve of disaster – something that should be shouted from every rooftop.

(Cardullo 1992: 180)

Dersu's failure to adjust to the city, which turns out to be his doom, is not in the least due to Arseniev's failure to adequately return Dersu's service of cultural mediation and translation. The message that Arseniev and Kurosawa seem to share is that the language of the city is not translatable back into the language of the *taiga*. Dersu's rejection of civilized life is supposed to be a harsh judgment on civilization as a perversion of nature, freedom and common sense, but it also comes across as a fulfillment of the inevitable. Quite literally, his murder on the way back to the *taiga* tells us that there is no turning back from the progress of civilization.

NEW YEAR'S EVE SCENE

The climactic scene of the film is New Year's Eve in the *taiga*, the last scene where we see Arseniev and Dersu in the Ussuri wilderness before they move together to Arseniev's house in Khabarovsk. The scene is climactic as much with regard to the plot development as to the friends' usual miscommunication, which has been driving the film all along but becomes tragic and self-reflexively allegorical at this point in the film.

In this scene Arseniev wakes up in his dark tent in the middle of the night to the eerie sound of the howling wind and the jingling of makeshift ice and tin Christmas decorations on a pine tree outside. He looks out of the tent, fixing his eyes on a decorated tree in the bluish nightlight. Both sound and lighting are uncannily reminiscent of the ghost scenes in Kobayashi Masaki's *Kwaidan* (1964). Arseniev glances at the campfire where Dersu is sitting awake, and

finally reclaims his place in the tent where we see him now sitting against the large grayish background of the tent wall undulating in the wind.

The bonfire outside makes the tent fabric an ideal screen for a shadow play. Right behind Arseniev's back, but in full view of the film audience, a clear-cut shadow of a tiger appears on the left side of the screen and makes a jump across the screen. Alerted by the noise, Arseniev turns his head to the right and to the left of the tiger's trajectory, grabs his rifle, and rushes out of the tent. He sees a highly agitated Dersu standing up, desperately throwing burning logs from the campfire into the darkness around him. Dersu has seen the tiger – sent, he believes, by the forest spirit Kanga to kill him. Kanga's revenge and his own failing eyesight make life in the forest unlivable for Dersu. In horror and despair, Dersu accepts Arseniev's standing invitation to join him in the city. Arseniev is happy to accommodate his friend who has rescued his life on many occasions during his Siberian expeditions; he will pay his debt by saving Dersu's life in return.

However, this climactic moment of their friendship is based on a delusion, full of tragic irony for both characters. The misunderstanding is expressed here through Arseniev's voice-over, in the didactic form of an ethnographer's omniscient comment: Arseniev interprets this night-time incident of agitation about the *amba*, the devilish tiger, as a projection of Dersu's animistic imagination deranged by old age and fear of the *taiga*. The voice-over relaying this interpretation is accompanied by an image from the earlier scene when Dersu by accident fired at the tiger and thought he had given the sacred animal a fatal injury. The red broken lines drawn as a special effect over the tiger's image convey its subjective quality as Dersu's imagination haunted by guilt and fear. At this moment, the viewer realizes that Arseniev did not really see the shadow of the tiger behind his back, though its presence was unambiguously conveyed to the audience. As usual, Arseniev projects his expectations onto Dersu in this scene. However, what Arseniev ascribes to Dersu's failing eyesight as a hallucination turns out to be Arseniev's own blindness. As the two men's worlds were physically separated through the screen-like wall of the tent that made the tiger's appearance real and physical on one side and invisible and spectral on the other, so is their communication based on mutual blindness and projection. Dersu turns out to be right, and it is Arseniev who is doomed to play the role of helper to the vengeful Kanga. It is precisely his advanced technology, namely the baleful gift to Dersu of the new rifle, which draws him into the myth.

At the moment that Dersu throws himself at Arseniev's feet to ask for help and rescue, he only precipitates the judgment that he fears. And Arseniev, glad to show his resourcefulness, unwillingly and unknowingly seals his friend's role as a victim and his own role as a perpetrator. The characters' embrace in this scene, appearing to express the symmetry of their mutual dedication and reciprocity, turns out to be a tragic embrace of two people blindly caught each in his own destiny and his own guilt.

This scene offers a self-reflexive model for any intercultural communication that (even when conducted with the best intentions and in good faith) is doomed to produce mistakes, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, displacements or false projections, and, moreover, becomes meaningful and significant exactly through its very failure. Kurosawa makes clear by Arseniev's example that the claim to have authentic insight into another's mind is an instance of hubris, which will be punished by an ultimate blindness. The larger dialogue and structure of his film make it clear that successful

intercultural communication can be only figural or allegorical, as he himself turns Arseniev's book into an act of memory and a memorial that conveys the melancholy of strongly felt but never articulated guilt.

The best example of such productive misunderstanding is the famous blizzard scene on the shores of Lake Hanka. Arseniev's and Dersu's respective cultures are visually symbolized by the two objects that the friends always carry along: Dersu's walking stick with a forked top and Arseniev's tripod, tools characteristic of the friends' respective cultures. As the blizzard comes down over Lake Hanka, Dersu ingeniously constructs a hut of dry cattails in which the two friends can keep warm overnight and wait out the storm. The major surprise for Arseniev, when he wakes the next morning, is the fact that Dersu has used his surveying tripod as a supporting structure, integrating this foreign scientific apparatus into the structure of a Udeghe or Nanai yurt.

The intercultural metamorphosis of the tripod does not appear in Arseniev's book. Therefore, Kurosawa's addition of this detail acquires all the more significance. Instead of being an instrument for the processes of scientific measurement and imperial surveillance, the tripod turns out to be a life-saving and sheltering device. It reverts in its cultural function to a more primitive, but at the same time a much more vital and humane, purpose. It comes to embody a symbiosis of cultures; or rather Dersu reveals this hidden potential in Arseniev's technological culture. Technology has its redemptive dimension, if put to the proper use, which in this case is a rather improper one; it also seems to be relevant to Kurosawa's message that the tripod with an optical device mounted on it recalls the setup of a movie camera.

The blizzard by Lake Hanka shows the two friends interchanging their technologies in a genuinely symmetrical relationship. In terms of the plot, the film is shown to be as much about Dersu as about Arseniev's failure to anticipate or prevent his friend's death. He fails to do for Dersu in his own milieu, Khabarovsk, what Dersu did for him in the blizzard scene on Lake Hanka.

FILM AS MEMORIAL

Considering the fact that the narrative of *Dersu Uzala* is supposed to represent a stream of Arseniev's memories, the absence of shots from his subjective point of view, or of 'subjective' camera-work through a presumed perspective of a character, which Pasolini once called the 'free indirect discourse', seems to be the most striking stylistic feature of the film. (The one exception would be the special-effects shot of the tiger, a hallucination attributed to Dersu.) The film is shot almost exclusively in the format of a long shot, which sometimes widens to a panoramic extreme or narrows to a medium long shot, but never stops conveying a strong sense of epic objectivity and detachment.

In one of the interviews, Kurosawa declared that '[t]he world today is an interplay of Eastern and Western cultures' (Anon 1962: 22). And in fact, the style of *Dersu Uzala* represents a peculiar mixture of Japanese and Soviet-Russian visual aesthetics, both of them, however, used so as to leave the viewers outside the film and prevent their identification with the characters and action on the screen in the manner typical of narrative cinema.

The style of Japanese scroll painting, famously admired by Sergei Eisenstein for its proto-cinematic but non-naturalistic aesthetic, characterizes the gigantic flat surfaces of many panoramic landscapes in the film. Overwhelming in size but rather minimalist and simple in their compositions, they show the tiny human figures projected sometimes as pure silhouettes onto the same plane



Figure 1: Arseniev, Dersu, and Arseniev's Theodolite against the sky with the moon and the sun.

as the colorful sur-dimensional shapes of the moon or the sun. [Figure 1] The collision on one surface of elements that one would expect in the Western visual regime since the Renaissance to be either 'foreground' or 'background' unsettles the sense of proportion between human being and elements and makes nature appear as an alien, sublime force, an entity in its own right, not just a backdrop to the human action.

In the scenes staging human interaction, for which the panoramic 70mm format is too large, Kurosawa uses the visual illusionism of the shot compositions framed with tree trunks or the darkened night-time settings in order to highlight the human figures, who are most of the time dwarfed by the expanses of nature. This type of enclosed *mise-en-scène*, usually organized around a bonfire or concentrated in a hut or a tent, comes across as a naturalistic theatrical microcosm of Stanislavsky's stage with the camera occupying the stable position of the 'fourth wall' [Figure 2].



Figure 2: Arseniev, Dersu, and the Russian soldiers around the campfire.

In these cases we can see clearly each person's posture and facial expression and witness a dialogue uninterrupted or punctuated by editing so that the meaning of the scene is up to the acting and blocking alone (Niogret 1995: 51). In fact, both stars Maksim Munzuk (Dersu) and Yuri Solomin (Arseniev) were trained as theater actors and pursued their careers on stage. And the film gives them space for creating realistic, psychologically convincing characters. *Distanciation* is achieved not through editing or acting but through the dissonant portrayal of their environment. Ironically, in this film shot mostly on location and dedicated to nature, Kurosawa engages all means available to denaturalize the *taiga* in a pictorial or theatrical way.

Kurosawa's idiosyncratic style suggests that he is concerned with enclosing reality, the realistic characters and their adventures in Siberia, in a showcase of memory. Moreover, he is concerned not with a representation of the flow of memory as a character's (Arseniev's) subjective, psychological experience, but as an objective process of historicization and memorialization of the bygone past. Therefore the exact historical dates of the expeditions figure in so visually prominent a manner in the film. And therefore, the film emulates visually the style of a two-dimensional still photograph, a pictorial sketch, or a three-dimensional model of a sculptured group conveyed by the theatrical *mise-en-scène*. The long takes are to convey the time which stopped flowing, being confined within a shot, instead of being conveyed through their sequence.

At a certain point in the film, Kurosawa inserts a series of still photographs, posing Arseniev's troop with Dersu in an actual reenactment of historical photographs. These quasi-stills reveal why the whole film is shot from a straight-on angle and appears to be staged at a theatrical distance. The scenes from the bygone past are supposed to be animated and put on display as pieces of historical evidence. The surrounding space preserves the memories like amber – intact but taken out of their context in life. The images become the traces of an epic, depersonalized, collective memory reminiscent of Daniel Libeskind's compositions in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, where the family photographs, letters and stationary objects of the victims are displayed in dark box-like enclaves inside the walls, which the visitor can access only through the straight-on angle perspective of a peephole in the darkened glass.

The aura of the film conveys a sense of sadness that goes beyond the tragic death of the book's protagonist. In his preface to the 1921 edition of his book, Arseniev explains that Dersu's clan, who formerly lived along the river Ulahe and practiced hunting, had died out totally by 1908 (Arseniev 1921: ii–iii). Dersu was the last of three survivors, two of whom had been killed by the Chinese in 1901. Not just Dersu, but Arseniev himself belonged to a tragically endangered species. Having been an officer of the Tsarist Army during his assignment to explore the Far Eastern borders of the empire, Arseniev received a warrant for arrest shortly before his natural death in 1930. His widow, arrested in 1937, was shot as a Japanese spy in 1938. His brother, a hero of the Russo-Japanese War, met the same fate, and Arseniev's daughter spent ten years in the labour camps.

The background of the Tuvan actor Maksim Munzuk, who played Dersu Uzala in the film, is also not free of tragic shadows. He became an orphan during the Russian Civil War when the Bolshevik Army made its way through Siberia. Since the boy was interested in the arts early in life and had some background in music and painting, as Vladimir Vasiliev, Kurosawa's Russian assistant director, vaguely reports in his book about Munzuk, we can easily

1. Owen Lattimore, visiting the Sungari region in 1933, found the Goldi in an advanced state of decline, which he blamed on the pressure of the Chinese settler population (Lattimore 1933: 20–1). Russian colonization exerted similar pressures to the north. On the measures taken by the Japanese colonial administration to control the Nanai/ Goldi/Hezhe, see 'Minzu wenti wuzhong congshu' Heilongjiang sheng bianji zu (1987: 16–17).

assume that Munzuk's parents were not necessarily farm hands but maybe farm owners – in any case, they belonged to an imperiled social class (Vasiliev 1979: 22). The actor was brought up in a Soviet orphanage according to the ideals of the Soviet ideology and made his artistic career through the entertainment division of the Red Army. With the role of Dersu, he was uncannily unlearning his Russian 'civilized' self and returning to his own ancestors' Siberian roots, as Arseniev portrayed them in his book.

And finally, Kurosawa himself embarked on *Dersu Uzala* shortly after his own suicide attempt, prompted by many reasons among which was the lack of recognition and success of his work in Japan. For Kurosawa, the return to *Dersu Uzala* recalled the time of Japanese militarism for which, as he mentioned above, Tsarist Russia furnished an analogy, but perhaps was better compared to the militarism and totalitarianism of the new Soviet State. It was a return to a book that had once offered him material and occasion for a silent resistance. Kurosawa was often criticized for having 'evasive political views' because usually he refused to explain his films, referring the critics and audiences to the films themselves. This advice should also be followed in the case of *Dersu Uzala*, despite Kurosawa's uncustomary volubility with regard to this film.

Kurosawa's film constitutes a nostalgic glance back at the pan-Asian space without borders at the time before the major tragedies of the century had happened, but it is made with historic knowledge of the things to come. This knowledge, to which the characters themselves are still blind, accounts for the film's idiosyncratically turn-of-the-century Chekhovian dramatism, which the Russian playwright called *undercurrent*. An *undercurrent* designates an unexpressed or understated conflict, or rather a tension in the situation, or in the characters' relationship, which is hidden under the seemingly calm and uneventful appearance of things. Like the river crossed by the explorers at one moment in the film, a stream of calm appearance can harbour a dangerous current leading to a hazardous waterfall.

Maybe the most uncanny and important dramatic undercurrent of the film with its focus on Dersu's grave is the historical fact that Dersu comes from the Siberian branch of the Goldi tribe. The closely related Nanai, known in Chinese as Hezhe, in nearby Manchuria were almost totally exterminated by the Japanese during their occupation of this territory in 1930s under the auspices of imperial race theory.¹

The treatment of nomadic peoples in the Japanese-dominated areas of Manchuria was ambiguous: on the one hand, the Tungusic aboriginal populations were claimed to be kin to the ancestors of the Japanese, and thus the ethnographic justification for a common political destiny of the peoples of Northeast Asia under Japanese dominion; but the Nanai and other nomadic hunter groups were regarded by the colonial administration as little better than gypsies and treated as an inferior race, herded into concentration camps, forced to endure military service during the traditional hunting season, and nearly exterminated in the fifteen years of the Manchukuo state's existence (Duara 2003: 180–8).

The victims of this genocide – for which no acknowledgment or repentance have ever been expressed – acquire a face in their ethnic kinsman Dersu Uzala across the Russian border, a member of an ethnicity that was similarly dying out under Russian and Chinese forays into Siberian territory. With this historical fact in mind, Dersu's wisdom and culture are not just those of primordial mankind, but those of a particular people exterminated as subhuman for their alleged lack of wisdom and culture. This message is encoded in the film as silently as are its other references to the Russo-Japanese war and other wars to come.

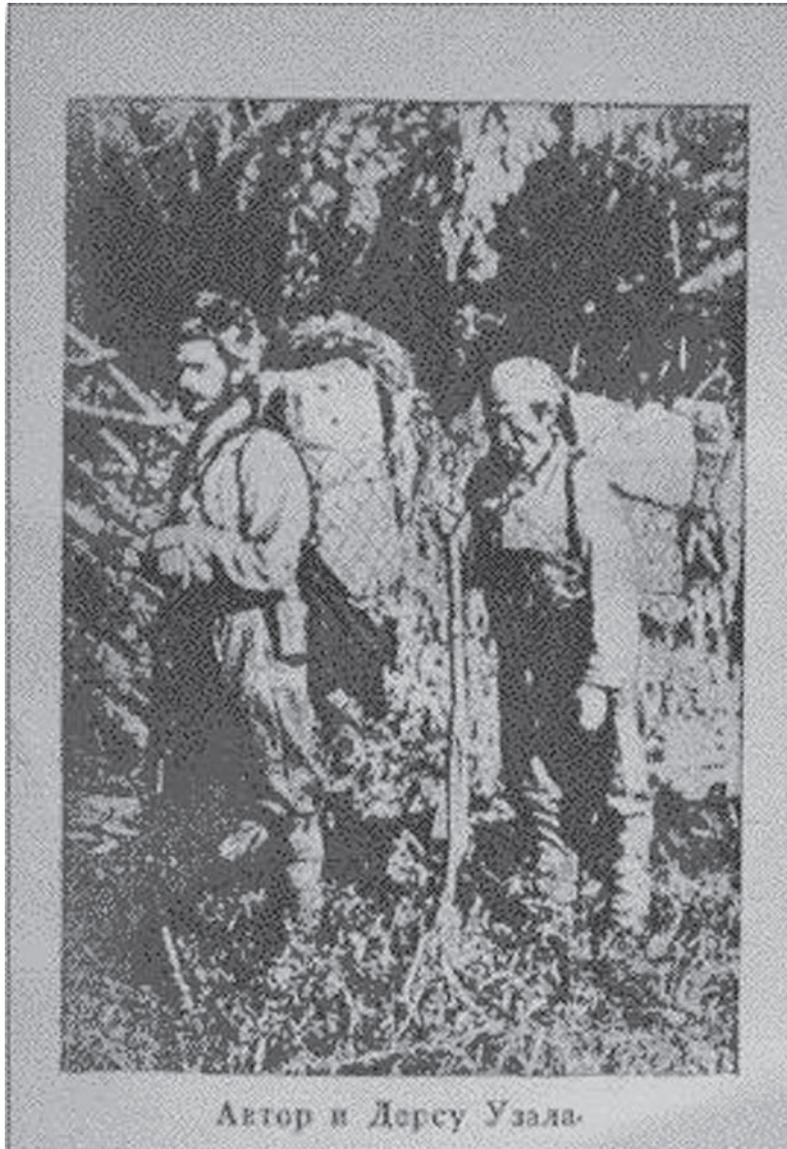


Figure 3: Arseniev and the historical Dersu with a Forking Stick.

The grave of Dersu Uzala is erased by the encroachments of civilization, but this civilization is not just that of the Russian Tsarist and then Soviet Empire. A Japanese audience can equally see itself as complicit in the erasure of Dersu's grave in Manchuria – an erasure for which Kurosawa tries to compensate cinematically by ending the film with Arseniev erecting Dersu's walking stick as a makeshift memorial over his grave. The last shot is a close-up of the forked upper side of the walking stick that has accompanied Dersu throughout the film.

The forked stick of the real Dersu, as we can judge from historical photographs, was held with the fork down to the earth [Figure 3]. Kurosawa turns it

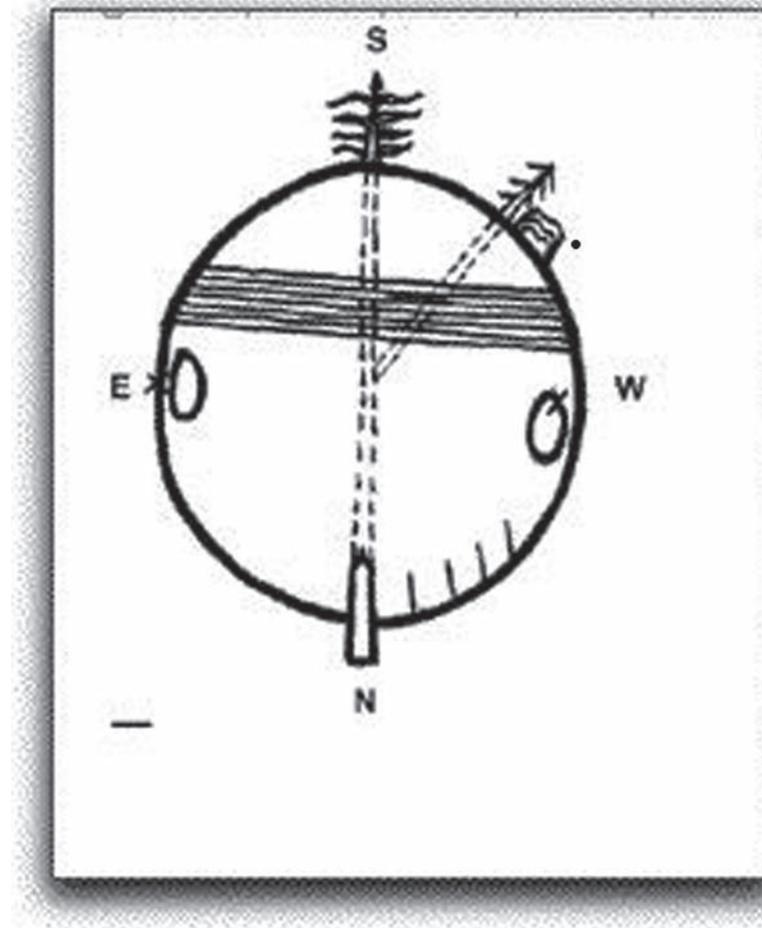


Figure 4: *The Nanai Shamanic Symbol.*

meaningfully upside down, to make the fork visible. This is not just a random choice. The forked stick represents the Nanai shamanic symbol of the World Tree and becomes a visual leitmotif of the film. The whole cosmology of the Nanai is condensed in this sign. Pointing to a Nanai shamanic drawing, the ethnographer Tatyana Sem explains:

In the Nanai shamanic drawing the World Tree in the sky of the Universe has a crown in the form of two trees: the Tree of Life and the snowy Tree of the Weather; on the earth the Tree of the Spirits stands with its roots upwards. If you join the crown and roots with an imaginary line of one tree trunk, it looks like the World Tree with a fork connecting all the worlds of the Universe from the above to the below and dividing the World Egg along the vertical line (the seven-layer sky above and the earth below) as well as along the horizontal line (ancestors on the right-hand side and people on the left). [Figure 4]



Figure 5: The Nanai Fork over Dersu's grave.

Taken out of the film's context and frozen into a sign on its own, this symbol transcends its intimate function as a memorial for Arseniev's deceased friend and becomes a symbol for a whole ethnicity that has suddenly disappeared from the surface of the Earth [Figure 5]. Not in vain, Kurosawa insisted that he wouldn't make a film without interest for the Japanese audience. And it is hardly surprising that his film encountered only a lukewarm reception in Japan, with Kurosawa being unwilling to announce its message from the rooftops. It was up to his viewers to search for his film's meaning. But to uncover this meaning was definitely not a comfortable enterprise.

Rayns' interview question about the relation between Japanese militarism and Kurosawa's film-making is more than apt. Would Kurosawa have become so interested in Arseniev's rather obscure book at the time of the Second World War if the national situation, as Rayns puts it, had been different? When coming across Arseniev's book with its central Nanai character, Kurosawa, it seems, seized upon the idea of the book as a memorial, as well as upon Arseniev's metaphor about the cinematic nature of memory.

Dersu Uzala is Kurosawa's only film shot outside Japan. And it is not without significance that for this international production he chose a topic in which Japan could share by way of commemorating the forgotten. Today, when the major trend of Kurosawa research consists in taking his work out of the framework of the binary opposition between East and West in order to see it in a network of global cinematic culture, this film can stand for Kurosawa's repeated attempt to make his cinema into Japan's entryway into the global community of nations.

The price of this entry was the acknowledgment as well as forgetting of uncomfortable historical facts. What Ernest Renan described in 1882 as the cultural process that constitutes a nation applied after the two world wars also to the constitution of global communities:

Forgetting, and I would even add, historical error are an essential factor in the creation of a nation, and for this reason the advance of historical studies often presents a danger for nationality [...]. Take the cities of Salonica or Smyrna, where you will find five or six communities,

each with its own memories, but as a group holding almost nothing in common. But it is essential to a nation that all individuals have a great many things in common, and also that all of them must have forgotten a number of things.

(Renan 1882: 7–9; translation by Haun Saussy)

The detour by the adaptation of a Russian source, Arseniev's book, allowed Kurosawa to restore Dersu's grave in a pan-Asian space on the Manchurian border so that the Japanese could join in their remembering and forgetting of the genocide with the whole modern world, thus entering a global community via the memorial magic of cinema.

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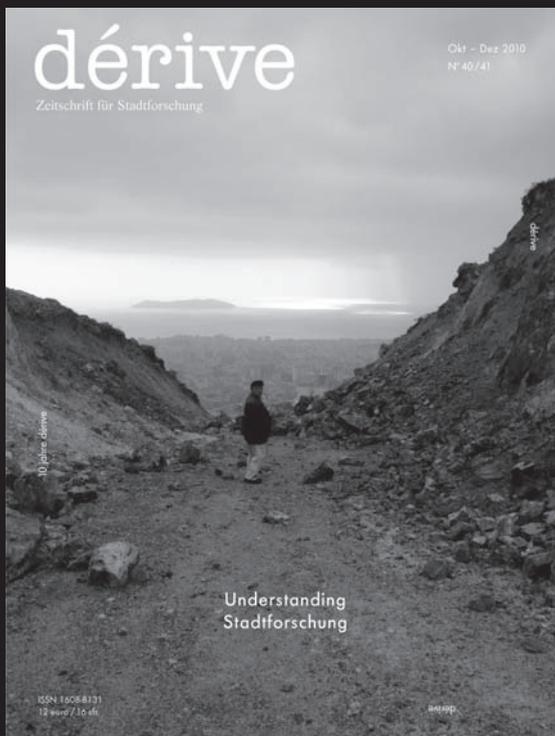
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