



***Dersu Uzala* (USSR-Japan, 1975, dir. Akira Kurosawa)**

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From the project *The 100 Most Important Asian Films: Canons of Asian Cinema*

By the time I saw *Dersu Uzala* as a teenager in my native city of Sofia, Akira Kurosawa was already a concept for cinephiles across Eastern Europe. The picture was coming with accolades from the festival in Moscow; it had won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. However, none of these prestigious factors accounted for the lasting impression that the film left on me. It was not the awards and the director's name, but the encounter with a completely different way of thinking about the world and about one's life that mattered. *Dersu Uzala* was putting forward a worldview that was not built on socialist ideas of action and progress but stressed the importance of

contemplation and introspection, and revealed a symbiotic co-existence where nature was not conquered but embraced. Whilst carrying a 'Soviet' label, it was a film that radically and subtly undermined the progressivist Soviet way of thinking. It was my first introduction to the restrained subtlety of Asian thought.

Based on the 1923 eponymous memoir of Far East Russian explorer Vladimir Arseniev and set during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this co-production was initiated by the Soviets as a move of cultural diplomacy. It was a good opportunity for Kurosawa, who was living through a difficult patch of his career at the time. The director collaborated on the adaptation with established novelist Yuri Nagibin. The cast included Yuri Solomin, one of USSR's finest actors and Tuva actor Maksim Munzuk (who stepped in to replace Toshiro Mifune, originally intended for the role of Dersu). Shooting took place in the region of the river Ussuri at the very Far East of the USSR, a setting that also provides the backdrop for Alexandr Dovzhenko's *Aerograd* (1935).

The plot of the film straightforwardly chronicles the encounters and gradual bonding of two men in the course of several years. Dersu Uzala serves as a local guide for the Russian explorer in the period 1902-1908. Together, they survive several extreme situations that bring them face to face with death – like a critical showdown at a frozen lake and an encounter with a ravenous tiger – and put their opposing views of struggle or surrender to the test. Dersu's unconventional stance of reverence to nature – particularly expressed in his philosophy about kanga, the powerful spirit of the taiga – gradually overpowers the explorer's impudent rationalism. He learns to seek out the elusive signals of nature,

gradually letting go of the ferocious stance of penetration and conquering. There are slow-paced lingering shots of wilderness and some spectacular scenes, yet the most memorable moments are those of the two men sitting together by the fire in the dark.

One of Kurosawa's finest films, *Dersu Uzala* is a tale of mutual acceptance. It asserts that different views of the world can co-exist non-violently.

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