Exploring Friendship and Worldviews in Akira Kurosawa’s Dersu Uzala

Akira Kurosawa’s *Dersu Uzala* (1975) is a masterful exploration of friendship and the complex interplay between contrasting worldviews. Based on the memoirs of Russian explorer Vladimir Arsenyev, the film beautifully captures the bond between Dersu Uzala, a Goldi hunter, and Arsenyev as they traverse the breathtaking yet unforgiving Siberian wilderness. This relationship unfolds against a backdrop of stunning cinematography, highlighting not only the vastness of nature but also the philosophical inquiries that lie at the heart of Kurosawa’s storytelling. Asakazu Nakai‘s cinematography is, as always, impressive.



The lush forests of North Eastern Asia.

At its core, *Dersu Uzala* illustrates the deep connection between its two protagonists, rooted in respect and mutual understanding. Dersu’s profound relationship with the natural world contrasts sharply with Arsenyev’s more rational, “modern” approach to exploration. This juxtaposition serves as a commentary on the tension between traditional wisdom and contemporary thinking. As the film progresses, the friendship between Dersu and Arsenyev evolves, revealing the richness of their shared experiences and the value of embracing differing perspectives.



My favourite shot from the film.

The evolving friendship between Dersu and Arsenyev is further illuminated by Kurosawa’s masterful cinematography, which not only captures the breathtaking beauty of the Siberian landscape but also acts as a visual commentary on their contrasting worldviews. As the characters navigate the vastness of their environment, the cinematography reflects their internal journeys, showcasing how Dersu’s intuitive understanding of nature complements Arsenyev’s rational perspective. The interplay between the two men and their surroundings emphasizes the film’s central themes: the difficulties of respecting traditional wisdom while engaging with contemporary thought and technologies. This dynamic relationship is beautifully mirrored in the expansive frames, which invite viewers to ponder the intricate connections between humanity, nature, and the differing philosophies that shape our understanding of the world.



The surveying tool used as a shelter from the elements.

The cinematography of *Dersu Uzala* plays a vital role in conveying these themes. Shot in 70mm film stock, the film immerses viewers in the grandeur of the Siberian landscape. Kurosawa's sweeping shots and meticulous framing not only enhance the visual experience but also serve as a metaphor for the philosophical questions the film raises. The vast wilderness mirrors the emotional depth of the characters' relationship, while the challenges they face together reflect the broader struggles of reconciling different worldviews.



A photographic still from the movie. MOSFILM wanted Toshiro Mifune to play Dersu.

While the cinematography of *Dersu Uzala* vividly encapsulates the film's thematic essence, it also serves as a narrative device that deepens our understanding of the characters' evolution. The visual artistry not only presents the stunning expanse of the Siberian wilderness but also captures the subtleties of the protagonists' emotional landscapes. As Dersu and Arsenyev traverse this imposing terrain, the camera's perspective shifts, reflecting their growing bond and mutual respect. This dynamic interplay between the landscape and their journey highlights the fluidity of their relationship, suggesting that navigating the complexities of nature mirrors their quest for harmony between intuition and reason. In this way, Kurosawa not only portrays their struggles but also emphasizes how embracing different worldviews can lead to personal transformation and a richer understanding of one another.



The lenses used were spherical so conducive to rainbows!

In the scene where the shadow of the tiger looms over Arsenyev’s tent, the film poignantly illustrates the cultural divide that underpins the relationship between Dersu and Arsenyev. Through Arsenyev’s voiceover, he expresses his assumption that Dersu’s claim of seeing the tiger is merely a product of his magic, revealing his skepticism and reliance on rationality. This moment encapsulates the tension between their worldviews: Dersu’s deep-rooted connection to nature and its mysteries stands in stark contrast to Arsenyev’s modern sensibilities. While Dersu’s understanding is grounded in instinct and lived experience, Arsenyev’s perspective struggles to appreciate the unseen forces that govern their environment. The tiger’s shadow serves as a haunting reminder of the unknown and the complexities inherent in the natural world, emphasizing how Dersu’s worldview, though often dismissed, offers valuable insights that challenge the harmonious narrative frequently presented by followers of modernity. Through this visual and narrative juxtaposition, Kurosawa enriches the film’s exploration of friendship amidst the vast, often inscrutable wilderness.



Amba’s shadow

Through stunning visuals and poignant storytelling, Kurosawa invites viewers to contemplate the intricate relationship between humanity and nature. Dersu embodies a worldview that values intuition and instinct, whereas Arsenyev’s perspective is rooted in scientific understanding. Their journey through the wilderness becomes a metaphor for the search for balance between these opposing ideologies. As they confront the challenges of their environment, they learn to appreciate the strengths each brings to their partnership, ultimately revealing the transformative power of friendship.

As the narrative unfolds, Dersu’s departure from the settlement underscores the incompatibility of his traditional worldview with the encroaching forces of modernity. After being arrested for cutting down a tree—an act that symbolizes his deep connection to nature and the resources it provides—Dersu is thrust into a world that no longer understands his way of life. This disconnection is further accentuated by the rifle he receives, a seemingly innocuous gift that ultimately is responsible for his death. The new rifle, with its powerful scope, represents the very modernization that alienates Dersu from his environment; it transforms him from a harmonious participant in nature to a more detached observer. In this way, the tool intended to empower him becomes a catalyst for his demise, reinforcing the film’s poignant message about the fragility of traditional ways of life in the face of progress and the inherent dangers that can arise from losing touch with one’s roots.



Dersu’s new gun. The scene with the young boy was very poignant.

In an era increasingly defined by modernity, *Dersu Uzala* stands as a compelling meditation on the necessity of understanding and honouring diverse perspectives. Kurosawa’s film not only highlights the profound bond between Dersu and Arsenyev but also invites viewers to contemplate their own relationships with nature and one another. The narrative serves as a critical lens through which we examine the tensions inherent in the dichotomy of urban and rural life, reminiscent of the broader European discourse on town versus country and emergent suburbanization in America.

Kurosawa challenges us to reflect on our own place within this landscape of change. Dersu’s journey invites us to consider the implications of progress on personal and communal identities, urging a reevaluation of what it means to coexist harmoniously with both nature and each other. In doing so, *Dersu Uzala* transcends its historical context, becoming a timeless exploration of the human condition, one that resonates with contemporary struggles against the backdrop of an ever-evolving world.



I loved the boldness of silence in this scene.



If only his walking stick could talk.



Photo of Dersu from wikipedia.

Source: https://www.idonthaveacoolname.com/exploring-friendship-and-worldviews-in-akira-kurosawas-dersu-uzala/