



Ikimono no kiroku (I Live in Fear) a.k.a. *Record of a Living Being* is a 1955 feature film directed by Akira Kurosawa. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Criterion Eclipse Series 7: Early Kurosawa dvd release of that film.

20 of a possible 20 points = ***** = a major classic

Japan 1955 black-and-white 103 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Toho Co. Ltd. Producer: Sojiro Motoki a Criterion Collection dvd release

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 2 Direction: Akira Kurosawa*
- 2 Editing: Chozo Obata*
- 2 Cinematography: Asakazu Nakai*
- Still Photography: Masao Fukuda*
- 2 Lighting: Kyuichiro Kishida*
- 2 Screenplay: Shinobu Hashimoto*, Fumio Hayasaka*, Hideo Oguni*,
and Akira Kurosawa*

Script Supervision: Teruyo Nogami

- 2 Music: Fumio Hayasaka*, Masaru Satō*, Hachirō Matsui (song, see below)**
(Song: “Cherry Pink Mambo”)

Orchestrations: Masaru Sato*

- 2 Art Direction: Yoshirō Muraki***

Costume Design: Miyuki Suzuki

Props: Kiyoshi Toda

- 2 Sound**

Sound Effects: Ichirō Minawa*

Sound Recording: Fumio Yanoguchi*

- 2 Acting**

- 2 Creativity**

20 total points

Cast: Toshiro Mifune* (Kiichi Nakajima), Eiko Miyoshi* (Toyo, Kiichi’s wife), Yutaka Sada* (Ichiro, Kiichi’s first son), Minoru Chiaki* (Jiro, Kiichi’s second son), Haruko Tōgō* (Yoshi, Kiichi’s first daughter), Kyōko Aoyama* (Sué, Kiichi’s second daughter), Kiyomi Mizunoya (Kiichi’s first mistress), Saoko Yonemura (Taeko, daughter of Kiichi’s first mistress), Akemi Negishi (Asako Kuribayashi, Kiichi’s present mistress), Kichijirō Ueda (Asako’s father), Masao Shimizu* (Yamazaki, Yoshi’s husband), Noriko Sengoku (Kimie, Ichiro’s wife), Hiroshi Tachikawa (Ryoichi, Nakajima’s son by a former mistress), Takashi Shimura* (Harada, member of family court), Kazuo Katō (Harada’s son Susumu), Eijirō Tōno (the old man from Brazil), Ken Mitsuda* (Judge Araki), Toranosuke Ogawa* (Lawyer Hori), Kamatari Fujiwara (Okamoto), Nobuo Nakamura (psychiatrist), Bokuzen Hidari (landowner), Yoshio Tsuchiya (factory worker after fire), Akira Tani (chunky jailbird), Senkichi Ōmura (skinny jailbird), Kokuten Kōdō (workers’ older family member), Noriko Honma (family member of workers), Shigeo Katō (mailman on scooter), Gorō Sakurai (factory worker), Atsushi Watanabe (factory worker Ishida), Kiyomi Mizunoya (Satoko)

Certainly one of the finest and the single most underrated of Akira Kurosawa’s thirty feature films, *Ikimono no Kiroku* (*I Live in Fear* a.k.a. *Record of a Living Being*) has continuing relevancy to contemporary audiences. Just

substitute “hypersonic missile” for A-bomb or H-bomb. There’s total resignation to radiation as a result of having to live with fallout from Chernobyl and Fukushima. But in a post Ukraine-invasion world, what seems more immediately menacing is some militantly “liberating” country bombing, with little or no forewarning, a smaller designated foe. Or neighbor.

Director Kurosawa was not interested in political ramifications stemming from martial utilization of nuclear energy. Rather, human consequences of such unnerving government policies attracted his attention. How does a person live under constant threat of annihilation from an impersonal and indiscriminating bomb?

In *I Live in Fear*, set in mid-1950s Tokyo, iron magnate Kiichi Nakajima is hounded by the specter of immediate death from radioactive fallout. His wealth can’t protect him and his sprawling family from consequences of atomic testing being mindlessly pursued by countries intent on defending themselves through technology inadequately understood. Test explosions by the Soviet Union, France, and the United States have released black rain to drift on air currents to other nations. Some of these are friendly, others neutral or hostile. Japan seems once again threatened, even though it’s no longer actively engaged in war.

Against this relentless, silent opponent Kiichi feels powerless. The only apparent solution is escape to South America’s nuclear-free zone. So he initiates negotiations to buy a farm in Brazil and move his entire clan there. The dilemma confronting him is unwillingness on the part of dependents to share his enthusiasm for emigration. They all wish to remain in their homeland. Even if they die prematurely and pointlessly as a result.

To effectively stalemate Kiichi’s proposed travel plans, his second eldest son, Jiro, prevails upon Toyo to file a complaint with family court against her spouse. The idea is to have Kiichi declared mentally quasi-incompetent, thus unable to spend any money without approval in advance from a court-appointed receiver. Milquetoast Ichiro, Kiichi’s eldest son, raises no objection to this. Nor does Kiichi’s elder daughter, Yoshi. Little sister Suè seems less enthusiastic. However, she’s outnumbered by in-laws and older siblings, as well as a quartet of extra-familial dependents whose regular periodic allowances are endangered by Kiichi’s newest channel of expenditures.

Forced to serve as his own public defender, the stalemated patriarch claims to be acting in the best safety interests of his entire tribe. A contemporary

Noah, he's fashioning a Brazilian "ark." Assorted kin, mistresses, and in-laws ought to gratefully accept it. The idea of somehow blending a legally sanctioned family with half-siblings and paternal mistresses in one harmonious household apparently isn't viewed by Mr. Nakajima as problematic.

Excluded from entry into family court, two mistresses, an unrecognized daughter, and similarly unclaimed son cool their heels on benches in the hallway, keeping at a distance those outside their immediate blood relationship. Each of these legal non-entities frets about potential divorce from Nakajima's ritual stipends.

Dentist Harada, Judge Araki, and Lawyer Hori meanwhile listen to claim and counter-claim from Nakajima's lawful family members. Harada, a volunteer serving as neutral citizen mediator, finds himself deeply moved by the seventy-year-old defendant's plight. He can't shrug off the man's behavior as merely erratic, irrational whimsy. Radiation does exist. It is a public menace. Perhaps exodus to Brazil could be salvation for all Japanese people.

However, what about a Brazilian of Japanese descent who prefers relocation to Japan over continuing life in the Sao Paulo area? Shouldn't there be concern for his health also?

Being pragmatists, Araki and Hori support the plaintiff's position. Kiichi's actions are too extreme and self-serving, in their view. Harada remains unconvinced of Nakajima's "insanity" amid internal family squabbling. So proceedings are suspended and a cooling-off period designated.

During that time, the industrialist continues to advance his Brazil scheme, approaching two living mistresses and an adult son by a deceased mistress for loans to allow purchase of sub-equatorial property. Thus attempting to bypass family court's directive against expending company funds for the present.

One mistress and the lazy son of another spurn his pleas. Ichi has better luck with his current paramour, who finds some validity in the appeal to keeping their child healthy and alive. She literally pounds her father into turning over whatever unspent money remains in his safekeeping from an ill-advised cash payment Kiichi had given him hours earlier to hold in trust. One further increment she knocks loose from a hidden home reserve to supplement it.

Though the total amount proves insufficient to effect transfer of Brazilian acreage, Nakajima's trading partner generously refuses partial down payment

and extends the deadline for closing their deal. That allows Kiichi to return loans to original sources, exonerating him from violation of court-orders.

Temporarily defeated, the increasingly frustrated survivalist drops to his knees and begs the total membership of his assembled clans to voluntarily join him in leaving Japan. A few accept this contrite offer: Asako, his current mistress, and wife Toyo. Others remain mutely resistant.

In a final desperate gambit to compel refuseniks, the stubborn old doom-monger sets fire to his own foundry, utterly demolishing it. With the family business destroyed, all recalcitrant holdouts will be forced to accompany him to the New World.

This action backfires, though, merely depriving factory workers and *their* families of wages and a livelihood. It also insures the family court's final decision will be commitment of confessed arsonist to a psychiatric hospital.

Still, Dr. Harada confides to his son he remains unsure who is insane: those who realize danger posed by atomic testing and do nothing, or people like Kiichi, who take some counteraction, even if that yields no positive result. A psychiatrist makes the same admission in a private discussion with the dentist.

The film ends in ambiguity, with Asako and Harada passing each other on a flight of steps in the psychiatric hospital. Though pausing, as if to greet one another, their communication remains aborted, neither being able to provide comfort or direction. They then continue journeying into an unpredictable future, embarrassed and uncertain.

Kurosawa's master work is a showcase of brilliant ensemble acting. Virtually all main characters and leading secondary ones are totally realized embodiments. It would be unfair to single out individual performers here amid such a plethora of exemplary characterizations.

Possibly an exception would be Toshiro Mifune's Kiichi, for the actor was only half as old at time of filming as the individual he was portraying. Though Mifune was somewhat too nimble for a septuagenarian, his depiction otherwise of a cantankerous, profane, headstrong leader intent on transporting functional dependents into some vague promised land only he desired was surprisingly believable, a stark contrast to customary handsome leading man roles.

Masao Fukuda's cinematography offers numerous highlights, beginning with the drama's opening sequence of Tokyo pedestrians and trolley riders

sweltering under a seemingly unblinking summer sun. The concluding staircase scene is another masterpiece of precise framing.

While Chozo Obata is twice guilty of slightly overextending silences at the end of key scenes – once in the staircase finale already cited and also in the coda to a conversation between Harada and his son Susumu about how “normal” Japanese citizens deal with radiation anxiety – most of his work propels the drama forward admirably. A couple Kurosawa trademark wipes are present, as well as notable pans, such as those illustrating the aftermath of Nakajima’s amateur conflagration effort.

Lighting throughout is calibrated with maximum precision, allowing each detail of constructed sets to be clearly visible to viewers. Sound recording by Fumio Yanoguchi, with reinforcing sound effects supplied by Ichirō Minawa, actually stuns auditors, particularly in a storm episode with cracks of thunder closely following roars of jets. There’s fine resonance to falling pieces of smashed crockery as well.

Spearheaded by weird, shrilly dissonant sounds from a theremin, Fumio Hayasaka’s menacingly atmospheric score, orchestrated after his death by Masaru Sato, overlays enveloping, almost tangible auditory suspense on actions which otherwise might seem predictably conventional. It highlights dysfunctional underpinnings of a family which thinks itself contented and stable until messianic disruptions triggered by its head reveal previously hidden fractures.

Yoshiro Muraki’s production design reaches nearly epic status in segments set inside, or adjacent to, the iron foundry. It makes stage backdrops and models appear as fully substantial and operative as actual structures they represent.

Asakazu Nakai, Kurosawa’s preferred director of photography, shows here why he so often was tapped to design visuals for A.K.’s productions. Courtroom scenes with an abundance of dialogue could have become static. Nakai insured against that by alternating close-ups and medium shots for those, moving gracefully across faces for reactions while never overlooking the omnipresent stenographer. His distinct subgroups of alienated, tenuously related individuals within the larger circuit of Kiichi’s extramarital associates, reflected admirably their emotional and physical separations from one another.

Using a complex, philosophical screenplay centered on individual responses rather than collective assertions, the quartet of Shinobu Hashimoto, Fumio Hayasaka, Akira Kurosawa, and Hideo Oguni created an effective dialogue about a critically urgent social problem, one simultaneously impacting on governments and individuals.

By keeping their film story limited to a small cross-section of people affected by decisions and tests in which they had no influencing share, scripters highlighted the chasm between policy and personal consequences. Do nuclear bombs impact on wide circles of men, women and children far from ground zeros? If so, how? Is psychological insecurity generated by the presence of atomic weaponry greater and more destructive than explosive heat and actual disintegrative power?

Screenwriters wisely made no attempt to answer these inquiries. Instead they turned audience attention to what mattered most: whether a single human being can tolerate the looming atomic Damocles' sword every second of every day hanging over his head without going utterly insane with worry and consternation.

A masterful technical achievement, *Ikimono no Kiroku* represents Kurosawa's filmmaking at its very best, with a minimum of flaccid dialogue and no miscasting or internal fragmentation. Due to its extremely mature themes and far from optimistic conclusion, the film is exclusively adult viewing. Anyone over the age of twenty should surely take the time to screen this harrowing feature and ponder the issue it tackles. *I Live in Fear* is very highly recommended and just as rewarding to watch as the more popular *Rashomon*, *High and Low*, or *Yojimbo*.