



10-1-2012

The Reenchantment of Eschatology: Religious Secular Apocalypse in Akira Kurosawa's Dreams

Justin Heinzekehr
Claremont Lincoln University, justinbh@goshen.edu

Recommended Citation

Heinzekehr, Justin (2012) "The Reenchantment of Eschatology: Religious Secular Apocalypse in Akira Kurosawa's Dreams," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

The Reenchantment of Eschatology: Religious Secular Apocalypse in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*

Abstract

The possibility of nuclear destruction in the modern world has created a secular eschatology which, unlike religious eschatologies, creates nihilism and apathy rather than ultimate meaning. The Japanese film *Dreams*, by Akira Kurosawa, depicts this secularized eschatology as well as a counter-apocalyptic utopia. However, Kurosawa does not merely repeat the Western visions of nuclear apocalypse, but uses Japanese folk religion as a lens through which this apocalypse can be viewed. By doing so, Kurosawa creates a specifically Eastern response to nuclear destruction: a “religious secular” eschatology. Despite its lack of critical success, *Dreams* provides a valuable alternative for Western theologians in a nuclear age.

Keywords

Kurosawa, eschatology, apocalypse, *Dreams*, nuclear disaster, secularism

Author Notes

Justin Heinzekehr is a PhD student in the Process Studies program at Claremont Lincoln University, a division of Claremont School of Theology. His research interests include process theology, Anabaptist theology and ethics, and peace theology.

With the invention of nuclear weapons, human society has pushed its power of destruction to an apocalyptic level. The end of the world, which used to serve only as a localized or mythological trope, can now be discussed as a real, even inevitable, fate for the planet as a whole. The possibility of apocalypse from a purely materialist, realist, or scientific standpoint poses a challenge to religious eschatologies, which, especially in the West, grant God absolute power over the future. If humans have the ability to wipe out life itself, eschatology can be framed in a secular way – i.e., without recourse to any divinely ordained destruction. Of course, nuclear war may also have a place in religious eschatologies, which often envision it as one step in the process towards God’s ultimate victory over the forces of evil.¹ However, the prospect of nuclear war uniquely lends itself to a vision of a purely human-caused apocalypse.

In the West, then, apocalyptic themes can generally be placed in two categories: the religious and the secular. As Conrad Ostwalt says in his analysis of the apocalyptic in film, “Secular apocalypses generally differ from traditional ones in the exclusion of the supernatural as a means of agency for the end of time...What normally occurs in these disaster films is that humankind replaces God in the apocalyptic drama in that humanity becomes responsible either for the destruction of the earth or the salvation of it or both.”² While religious eschatologies imagine an ultimate purpose behind global destruction, the secularization of eschatology generally manifests itself in absurdism. As Daniel Wojcik says, “Ideas about the unalterable destruction of the world, when lacking the mythic component of worldly renewal and the belief in divine control, ultimately may be expressed as a form of nihilistic fatalism.”³ The secularization of apocalypse therefore results in widespread feelings of apathy and futility.⁴

As many scholars have pointed out, however, the dichotomy between secular and sacred is a product of Western civilization and is not universally applicable. For most of human history, religious and secular spheres have historically been intertwined, making impossible any sharp

distinction between the two. According to William Cavanaugh, the dichotomy between religion and secularity was a function of the rise of the modern nation-state in 15th to 17th-century Western Europe. The invention of religion was bound up with changing configurations of power and contributed to the new dominance of colonial powers. “Specifically, the concept of religion justifies the liberal state’s self-presentation as an apparatus concerned with the wholly negative function of preventing the incursion of substantive, collective ends into the public sphere.”⁵ We should expect, therefore, that Ostwalt’s distinction between traditional and secular apocalypse might not translate well to non-Western film.

Furthermore, eschatology itself is foreign to many religious worldviews. As Norman Cohn says, the idea of a final consummation of time only appeared with Zoroastrianism around the 6th century BCE.⁶ From there, the idea was adopted into Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, most Eastern worldviews maintain a cyclical view of time in which there is no hope for a final end of the world itself. In particular, Shintoism has traditionally done without any form of eschatology whatsoever. As Stuart Picken says, “[S]ince Shinto is concerned with development and stages of growth, it really views death as simply a stage in a longer process. Certainly there is no kind of Shinto eschatology, and little about life after death in the Western sense in which this is conceived. Later concepts, such as the idea of the Pure Land, belong entirely to Buddhism.”⁷

Despite the foreignness of apocalypse, especially secular apocalypse, to the Eastern worldview, the recent “secularization” of apocalyptic possibility has been foisted onto Japanese society. As the only country as yet to sustain a nuclear attack, Japan has had to wrestle even more than others with the implications of nuclear destruction.⁸ Akira Kurosawa, Japan’s best-known film director, produced several films that explored the psychological effect of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These films are not necessarily apocalyptic, since they deal

only with the historical, localized destruction of American atomic bombs in World War II. However, towards the end of his life, Kurosawa directed a film called *Dreams*,⁹ which explores explicitly apocalyptic and counter-apocalyptic futures. Given his Japanese context, Kurosawa's treatment of eschatology provides an interesting specimen of eschatology framed in an Eastern context. I argue here that apocalypse in Kurosawa's *Dreams* cannot be neatly categorized within the usual Western framework.

The difference lies in Kurosawa's juxtaposition of secular and religious apocalyptic themes. While on the surface, his visions appear to exist in a materialist or realist paradigm, Kurosawa's depiction of eschatological possibilities must in fact be understood through a religious or mythological lens, specifically that of Japanese folk religion. While modern technology has moved eschatology from the mythological to the secular, Kurosawa's film takes us in the opposite direction, remythologizing the secular. In doing so, Kurosawa's counter-apocalyptic vision provides an alternative to either the hopelessness of materialistic apocalypse or the yearning for supernatural intervention that characterizes religious apocalypse. Rather than mimicking either of these two Western forms of eschatology, *Dreams* is a uniquely Eastern apocalyptic film that blurs the distinction between the religious and the secular.

Dreams is one of Kurosawa's lesser known films, receiving only lukewarm critical review. Compared to his other films, *Dreams* is accused of being simplistic, didactic and self-conscious.¹⁰ Certainly *Record of a Living Being* (1955) or *Rhapsody in August* (1991) provide more nuanced and interesting explorations of post-nuclear Japanese society. However, the apocalyptic elements of *Dreams* do provide a unique window into Kurosawa's vision for society, a prescriptive rather than descriptive take on post-nuclear Japan. The very characteristics that make the film almost unworthy of Kurosawa also make it interesting in terms of eschatology. Despite its didactic tone, *Dreams*, out of all of Kurosawa's films, makes most obvious the

contemporary yearning for a counter-apocalyptic future in the face of nuclear apocalypse. Moreover, Kurosawa succeeds in expressing this desire in a way that defies Western tendencies to separate “religion” from the public sphere.

The film is made up of eight short segments, each ostensibly based on an actual dream of the director. Of these eight segments, the last three pertain to the future of society. The first of these, “Mt. Fuji in Red,” begins with the explosion of nuclear reactors at the base of Mt. Fuji. There is chaos in the streets, and a short dialogue between “I” (the character representing Kurosawa), a businessman and a mother with a child. The film cuts to a scene on the coast, where most of the Japanese crowd has already leapt into the sea. Presumably all these people have drowned, but even if they were to survive the leap, the businessman explains, there would be no chance of survival. The nuclear fallout will expand too far even for dolphins to escape its effects. As the four of them stand on the edge of the cliff, clouds of nuclear material waft over them, bringing with it slow and certain death. The woman expresses a deep sense of betrayal (“They told us it was safe!”) and the businessman acknowledges his guilt and responsibility for the existence of the reactors. Aware of the absurdity of his action, the businessman too jumps off the cliff. The segment ends with “I” and the woman hopelessly exposed to the radiation around them.

The next segment, “The Demon,” is set in a post-apocalyptic Japan. “I” is walking over barren mountains of ash and comes across a man horribly disfigured by the fallout of nuclear missiles. The “demon” explains the irreversible damage done to this world. Humans have all grown strange horns on their heads that cause them excruciating pain. Even the few plants that grow here are crazy – there are giant dandelions and roses that have stems growing out of their petals. In such a world, the demons can only survive through cannibalism. Death itself is seen as a release from the unending misery of existence. Looking over the mountain, the demon shows

“I” a scene of Dantesque horror. Groups of demons writhe in pain around blood-red pools of toxic waste. Finally, the demon turns to threaten “I,” who runs and stumbles down the mountain of ash.

The last segment of the film, “Village of the Watermills,” counters these apocalyptic images with an idyllic village scene filmed on a wasabi farm in Nagano. “I” wanders up to the village and sees a group of children sprinkling flowers on a rock by a river. He notices an old man repairing a waterwheel, and asks him why the children did this. He explains that a stranger was once found dead on that spot many generations ago. The villagers took pity and buried him there, and it is now a tradition to put flowers on the gravestone whenever anyone passes the spot. The old man goes on to say that the village has abandoned all modern technology and lives in harmony with nature. They harvest rice in the traditional manner, use dead firewood and cow dung for fuel, and live to a ripe old age. (The old man himself is 103 years old.) After talking with “I,” the old man rises to join the funeral celebration of another villager. The inhabitants of the village do not mourn death when it comes naturally to those that have lived a full life. The film ends as the funeral procession passes. As “I” departs, he drops flowers over the grave of the stranger.

Despite the heavy-handed thematic nature of the film, *Dreams* contains more depth and ambiguity than some critics give it credit for, probably due to the Western critics’ unfamiliarity with the folk religion upon which many of the “dreams” are based. The link to Japanese folklore provides the film with added layers which counteract the moralistic dialogue in much of the film.

Of the eight episodes in *Dreams*, the first four are set in a specifically mythological mode. The first episode, “Sunshine Through the Rain,” features the mythological *kitsune*, or foxes. The *kitsune* are ambiguous spirits in Japanese folklore; they are seen as messengers for Inari, the rice deity, but they also function as the shape-shifting tricksters so common in

mythology.¹¹ In *Dreams*, the *kitsune* exhibit this ambiguous relationship to humans. “I” (a young boy) disobeys his mother and comes across a wedding of the *kitsune*. Because humans are not allowed to see these ceremonies, the boy is asked to commit suicide. His mother gives him no pity. The rules of the *kitsune* are harsh, but clear, and it is his own fault if he is now doomed to die. The scene ends with the boy leaving home to ask the foxes for unlikely forgiveness.

The second episode, “The Peach Orchard,” explores the relationship between traditional Japanese dolls (*hina-ningyo*) and the spirits of peach trees. In Japanese folklore, such dolls are commonly thought to temporarily house spirits for the duration of the doll festival. If one appropriately welcomed these spirits into one’s home, they would secure blessings and prosperity for the next year.¹² In this episode, however, the spirits are angered by the cutting down of the family’s peach orchard. The boy attempts to apologize to the spirits for this destruction, and eventually they understand that he also felt deeply the loss of the peach blossoms. In the form of a ceremonial dance, the spirits give the boy one last look at the orchard.

In “The Blizzard,” Kurosawa draws on the folk legend of Yuki-onna. Yuki-onna is a spirit that appears during snowstorms in order to lure travelers to their deaths.¹³ In the film, a group of mountaineers are caught in a blizzard and begin to lose energy. They begin to fall asleep one by one. As the last climber succumbs to exhaustion, he sees a woman through the snow who spreads a blanket over him and assures him that, “The snow is warm.” Ultimately, he resists the temptation to sleep and awakens the other climbers.

Film critic Terrence Rafferty’s review of this scene provides a good example of the misunderstanding that can occur when Western critics view the film without a knowledge of the underlying mythology. Of the Yuki-onna, he says, “We can’t take our eyes off her, and we’re never quite sure what she’s meant to represent. She is beautiful – impossibly, indefinably beautiful – and this is perhaps the most piercing image ever made of the desires that keep people

from surrendering to death: *this* is a spirit to leap out of your deathbed in pursuit of.”¹⁴ Rafferty sees the beauty of the scene but misses the sinister nature of that beauty. The Yuki-onna represents, of course, the very desire to surrender, a desire to *keep* to one’s death bed rather than leaping out of it. Without the benefit of a mythological background, Rafferty misses the richness (and horror) of this scene.

“The Tunnel” combines World War II imagery with the *yurei* of folk mythology. According to popular legend, a person’s *reikon*, or soul, travels through a sort of purgatory after death in order to join the ancestors. However, if a person dies with unfulfilled desires, their *reikon*, or soul, may transform into a ghostly *yurei* that haunts the physical world.¹⁵ Kurosawa depicts an officer who must face the *yurei* of a platoon of soldiers that were killed under his command. They report for duty as usual, not believing that they are dead, and the officer must convince them to leave this world for the afterlife.

The fifth episode, “Crows,” portrays Kurosawa as an artist daydreaming in front of a set of Van Gogh paintings in a gallery. He imagines himself in the landscapes of the paintings, and has a conversation with Van Gogh himself. Despite the magical feel of this scene, it is clear that the intended interpretation is that of a daydream rather than any mythological event. It is interesting to note that this first de-mythologized scene is also the scene that introduces most clearly Western influences into the film.

Except for the fifth episode, the only “dreams” that can be interpreted in a purely materialistic way are the scenes described earlier that deal with apocalyptic themes. “Mt. Fuji in Red” and “Village of the Watermills” both portray a heightened version of reality, the first nightmarish, the second idyllic. However, neither scene makes any explicit reference to Japanese folklore. “The Weeping Demon” does make explicit reference to mythology in its identification of the disfigured humans as *oni* (demons). In this scene, however, the folklore serves only as a

metaphor for a strictly materialistic, albeit fanciful, possibility, i.e. total nuclear war and devastation. In the same way that humans who suffer greatly are said to become *oni* in some Japanese folktales,¹⁶ nuclear fallout has caused such intense suffering that the survivors are better described as monsters. This story does not rest on the actual existence of mythological spirits, as does the first half of the film.

The contrast between the explicitly mythological first half of the film and the de-mythologized second half provides a commentary on the way that Western technology and civilization has broken into an Eastern context in the modern era. Apocalypticism, virtually unknown in Eastern paradigms, has forced its way into the Japanese psyche with Hiroshima. But this apocalypticism is not even the prophetic, value-laden apocalypticism of Christianity. At least the Christian vision of the end-times overlays ultimate meaning onto its view of hopelessness for this world. The nuclear age has shown the East, and Japan in particular, an uncompromising materialistic apocalypse. The resulting nihilism appears to leave no room for ultimate value.

Yet Kurosawa does more than simply portray a nihilistic apocalypse. His nightmarish scenes present a strong opposition to the consumerism, technology and hubris that make nuclear destruction possible. Moreover, his setting of a materialistic apocalypse alongside mythological scenes leads the viewer to see materialism itself through a mythological lens. These factors, each of which we will examine in more detail, contribute to Kurosawa's overall strategy. As a whole, Kurosawa aims to remythologize reality in order to finally arrive at the culmination of the film: the counter-apocalyptic vision of society in harmony with nature.

The juxtaposition of "Mt. Fuji in Red" and "The Weeping Demon" with "Village of the Watermills" highlights Kurosawa's objection to consumerism. In the former scene, destruction occurs not through an act of violence, but through an accident made possible by society's greed for electricity. The nuclear plant exists, not because of any intrinsic necessity, but to quench

consumer demand. Here the businessman represents the culpability of a consumer society, as opposed to the innocence of the children who are also doomed to die. In the face of the mother's rage against their hopeless predicament, the businessman says merely, "I'm sorry. I am one of those who deserve to die." This character is perhaps the calmest of the three survivors, but only because he has most absorbed the despair of the situation. He quickly jumps off the cliff to avoid a slow and painful death. "Waiting to die isn't living," he says.

So too in "The Weeping Demon," the wasteful tendencies of capitalism are criticized. Nuclear fallout has wiped out any edible plants or animals from the earth, and the "demons" resort to cannibalism. The main demon tells "I" about his former life. "I was a farmer when I was a man...I dumped gallons of milk in the river to keep the prices up. I buried potatoes and cabbages with a bulldozer...How stupid!" In the context of complete destitution, it seems ludicrous to have privileged profit above the natural plenitude of the earth.

The connection between secular apocalypticism and consumerism is brought home in the dialogue between "I" and the old man in "Village of the Watermills." "I" notices that the homes contain only oil lamps. "There's no electricity here?" he asks. The old man responds, "Don't need it. People get too used to convenience. They think convenience is better. They throw out what's truly good." After witnessing the complete destruction of nature two scenes before as a direct result of demand for electricity, this statement is especially striking. Kurosawa thus calls into question the structures that make nuclear apocalypse possible. He offers instead an alternative to consumerism in which "convenience" is scorned and beauty is preserved. Kurosawa insists on the incompatibility of capitalism and a counter-apocalyptic society (i.e., one that is sustainable and rhythmic rather than terminable).

Technology also fares poorly in Kurosawa's film. It is technology that allows both nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons, both of which provide no benefits to society that can possibly justify their destruction of nature. The clearest anti-technological statement can be found in "Village of the Watermills," again in the words of the old man. "People today have forgotten they're really a part of nature," he says. "They always think they can make something better. Especially scientists...They only invent things that in the end make people unhappy." For Kurosawa, technology is ultimately destructive in its inherent undermining of a sustainable relationship between humans and nature.

Technology is especially harmful when it is linked to excessive hubris. Not only do scientists create unnecessary and destructive inventions, but they also place excessive value on them. "[Scientists] are so proud of their innovations. What's worse, most people are, too. They view them as if they were miracles. They worship them." In the "Weeping Demon," Kurosawa caricatures the hierarchy of society built on arbitrary distinctions. "Even here we have grades," the demon says. "One-horn demons like myself always get eaten by those who have two or three horns. Before, they were powerful and pretentious. And now they still throw their weight around as demons." Again, Kurosawa underscores the tendency of humans to place value wrongly or arbitrarily. That which truly has value is disdained, while destructiveness or brute power is honored.¹⁷

While Kurosawa's opposition to consumerism, technology and hubris are important to his vision, his most creative move is to place these concerns within a context of mythology. The film, when viewed as a whole, builds from its mythological scenes and maintains a mythological tone even as its content shifts to a secular mode. One arrives at the apocalyptic scenes thoroughly immersed in a mythological worldview, and thus cannot help but view the secular through the lens of the mythological. Kurosawa encourages this in the viewer by blurring the lines that

separate the two modes of thought. In “The Weeping Demon,” of course, we are led to connect nuclear fallout with the *oni*-creating suffering of Japanese folklore. In “Mt. Fuji in Red,” the mountain, illuminated by nuclear explosion, immediately evokes in us a broader range of meaning. The mountain is not just a mountain, explainable solely by geological forces. Fuji is rather a paradigmatic symbol of natural beauty, an always-changing and always-unique window into transcendence.¹⁸ Of course, with this Fuji in mind, we experience the nuclear explosions as a sacrilegious mockery of nature itself. And in the final section, we understand that, behind the old man, the village, the waterwheels, and the story of the stranger, there is something like mythology at play. In fact, Kurosawa has created a secular return to an imagined age of folklore, in which humans and nature lived in closer connection to one another.

Kurosawa’s counter-apocalyptic vision is, perhaps, too simplistic to warrant much comment. After all, many authors and artists have proposed utopias with more depth to them. Many religious groups have even attempted to put into practice what Kurosawa describes so idyllically in his final film segment, with mixed results.¹⁹ Perhaps Kurosawa’s *Dreams* succumbs, in the end, to nostalgia rather than insight. Kurosawa wishes for a romanticized past in which humans are remembered (or, more likely, misremembered) as living in perfect harmony with nature.

In another sense, Kurosawa might be dismissed as simply repackaging a common Western pattern of apocalyptic films. As Conrad Ostwalt notes, there is an “End of Days” genre which is based on the primal fear of non-existence but actually functions to allay this fear. If the fear is related to divine judgment (as in *Left Behind*), the film points toward the hope of divine redemption. If the fear is ecological collapse (*Waterworld*) or an asteroid (*Armageddon*), the film shows humanity overcoming these obstacles.²⁰ Whether religious or secular, apocalyptic films consistently explore themes of destruction and deliverance. *Dreams* is perhaps simply one more

effort to provide comfort in the face of an impending threat to human existence. It plays on the fear of nuclear disaster, but ends with an alternative hopeful future in which nature trumps technology.

Certainly *Dreams* does follow in a long line of Western apocalypticism, and Kurosawa finds source material both in Western culture and in the Western technology that had such disastrous effects on Japan during World War II and following. Yet there is something different about the way that Kurosawa overlays mythology onto materialism. In response to the apathy of secular apocalypticism, Kurosawa suggests that there is a deep value below the surface of things. We find something of this value when we re-experience the reverence and wonder that mythology evokes in us. Like the process theologian David Griffin, Kurosawa sees the need for a “reenchanted” world.²¹ However, Kurosawa retrieves enchantment not by denying supernaturalism, as Griffin does, nor by embracing it, as do more conservative religious groups, but by traveling *through* it to an enriched view of the world. He holds mythology lightly, using it as a lens without insisting on its content. The result is not a naturalistic theism, but a mythologized (or “religious”) secularism.

The history of religion in Japan may help to place this “religious secularism” in perspective. Japanese religion has always been a mixture of Shinto, the worship of gods representing natural forces, and Buddhism imported from Korea. These traditions made up a single ideological/cultural milieu until the 18th century. In Japan prior to this time, it would not have been possible to define either Shintoism or Buddhism as a distinct set of beliefs or practices in opposition to one another. When Japan was forcibly opened to Western trade, however, the Meiji government perceived the need for a distinctly Japanese ideology, and attempted to “purify” Shinto of its Buddhist elements. This purified Shinto became the official ideology of the state, and was used to foster unity and loyalty to the emperor.²²

In the 1870s, however, Japanese leaders came under pressure to follow the trends of Western society towards the separation of religion and state. In 1875, the government did declare freedom of religion for its subjects, but made a distinction between Shrine Shinto, a set of public rites dedicated to worshipping the state, and Sect Shinto, which included doctrinal beliefs. The latter was considered religion, the former, merely “rites” or civic duties.²³ This placed the Japanese government in the awkward position of designating identical activities “religious” if they were performed privately, and “ritual” (public, non-religious) if they were performed by the government.²⁴

By the end of World War II, Shrine Shinto had become so successful that the Allied Powers decided to remove it from public power. The rationale for doing so was the same that Japanese leaders had used for separating Shrine Shinto from popular Shinto: the separation of religion and state. “After years of denying the religiosity of Shinto, priests and apologists found themselves suddenly defined as religious, limited by the very principle of freedom of religious belief which they had once overcome by defining themselves against religion.”²⁵ Today, ritual and doctrine still tend to be separated in Japanese society. Ritual is perceived as a component of social responsibility while individual “doctrines” are viewed with suspicion.²⁶ “Indeed, ritual actions are increasing in modern Japanese society despite the fact that fewer and fewer Japanese actually believe in gods and their ability to bring benefits.”²⁷

The history of religion in Japan has a significant effect on the way that religion and secularity are conceived in Japanese society. As Sarah Thal suggests, the idea of “Japaneseness” itself is a product of Shinto leaders blurring the boundaries between church and state, sacred and secular.²⁸ If this is the case, we might see Kurosawa’s film as a uniquely Japanese response to the threat of nuclear annihilation. Although he draws on the originally Western idea of

apocalypse in order to address an existential fear, he portrays the threat of the end of the world and the possibility of redemption in a truly Japanese manner.

In summary, Kurosawa's "religious secular" eschatology differs from the typical Western depictions of apocalypse, which fall into two major categories. Compared to the religious apocalyptic films in the West, *Dreams* does not rely on any type of divine omnipotence to guarantee a particular outcome. While he uses religious tropes in the film, they do not function as literal solutions to the existential fear of nuclear disaster. Rather, they serve as a lens through which that threat can be viewed. Just as Japanese society has grown skeptical about the ability of the gods to intervene in their lives, Kurosawa does not suggest that disaster will be initiated or averted supernaturally. The scenes that look most to the future are also those without explicit mythological content – that is, the events in these scenes can be explained in purely natural terms, even if the tone of the film is shot through and through with mythology.

Precisely because of this mythological tone, though, Kurosawa's *Dreams* cannot be categorized as a purely secular apocalyptic film either. In the West, secular apocalypse is usually accompanied by nihilism, if the disaster is seen as inevitable, or humanism, if the disaster is overcome through human effort. *Dreams* avoids both of these patterns. Instead, Kurosawa chooses to overlay onto an ostensibly secular or humanist future a mythological or religious framework. Nuclear disaster, which can be portrayed purely materialistically in the West, is seen as a sacrilegious act through the lens of Japanese mythology. The solution, therefore, is not portrayed simply as a human endeavor, although certainly it requires a human response. Rather, Kurosawa's final vision for the future is of a society which uses ritual and respect to create a sustainable way of life. This includes celebrating the cycles of life and death, honoring members of the community, and treating the natural world as an end in itself. As in the history of Shinto, the line between religion and secular ritual is very blurry indeed.

Kurosawa's use of mythology in *Dreams* represents a creative response to the real possibility of nuclear apocalypse. By presenting scientific materialist eschatology in the light of folklore, he illustrates and condemns the loss of value that has occurred in the modern world. His culminating counter-apocalyptic vision then provides a positive example of the sustainable, value-laden existence that Kurosawa hopes for human society. This vision is a direct challenge to the Western-made systems of capitalism and scientific materialism, and offers a specifically Eastern solution to their corresponding nihilism. Despite its relative lack of critical success as a film, *Dreams* offers a window into non-Western conceptions of eschatology. It reveals to Western viewers a possibility beyond the religious/secular dichotomy that has been an enduring assumption of our civilization. As Western scholars begin to realize that "religion" itself is a constructed category, *Dreams* can offer, in the medium of film, an alternative way of categorizing ideology, ritual and culture.

¹ Hal Lindsey warns, "Look for some limited use of modern nuclear weapons somewhere in the world that will so terrify people of the horrors of war that when the Antichrist comes they will immediately respond to his ingenious proposal for bringing world peace and security from war." Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970), 185.

² Conrad Ostwalt, "Apocalyptic," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 379.

³ Daniel Wójcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 132.

⁴ See also Polkinghorne's discussion of scientific accounts of the end of the world, characterized with the subtitle "Frustration and Futility." John Polkinghorne, "Eschatology: Some Questions and Some Insights from Science," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 30.

⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 84.

⁶ Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁷ Stuart D. B. Picken, *Historical Dictionary of Shinto* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 71.

⁸ This is unfortunately only more relevant since the 2011 malfunction of Japanese nuclear plants as a result of an earthquake.

⁹ All quotes and plot summaries for the film are taken from Akira Kurosawa, *Dreams*, DVD (Warner Home Video, 2003).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Terrence Rafferty, "Review of Dreams," in *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa*, ed. James Goodwin (New York: G.K. Hall, 1994), 218–21. Stuart Galbraith gives an even more disparaging review in his major biography of Kurosawa: Stuart Galbraith, *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2002), 609–12.

¹¹ Kiyoshi Nozaki, *Kitsuné; Japan's Fox of Mystery, Romance & Humor* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1961).

¹² Alan Scott Pate, *Japanese Dolls: The Fascinating World of Ningyo* (Tokyo: Tuttle Pub, 2008), 54. Available online through Google Books.

¹³ Michael Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 293–4.; Lafcadio Hearn, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1904), 109–18.

¹⁴ Rafferty, "Review of Dreams," 220.

¹⁵ Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, 156.; John Stevenson, *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales* (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005), 8–9.

¹⁶ Marian Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past: Sixty-Two Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 163–5.

¹⁷ For more on the relationship between apocalypse and the worship of power, see Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

¹⁸ One thinks, for instance, of Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, the classic set of prints that depict unique aspects of Fuji in various contexts.

¹⁹ One thinks, for instance, of the Amish in the United States. While they have succeeded in maintaining a robust alternative society, even the Amish lifestyle does not completely solve sustainability issues. For example, in many Amish communities the birth rate has outpaced the availability of cheap farmland. More and more young Amish people are turning to factory work instead of farming, which may make it harder for the community to maintain their separation from certain mainstream technologies and culture. See Donald B. Kraybill and Steven M. Nolt, *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Ostwalt, Conrad, "The End of Days," in *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William L. Blizek (London; New York: Continuum, 2009), 290–9.

²¹ See David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

²² Sarah Thal, "A Religion That Was Not a Religion," in *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History*, ed. Derek R. Peterson and Darren R. Walhof (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 104.

-
- ²³ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 96.
- ²⁴ Thal, "A Religion That Was Not a Religion," 106.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.
- ²⁷ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 97.
- ²⁸ Thal, "A Religion That Was Not a Religion," 112.

References

- Ashkenazi, Michael. *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*. Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2003.
- Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Cohn, Norman. *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Galbraith, Stuart. *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Griffin, David Ray. *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Hearn, Lafcadio. *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1904.
- Keller, Catherine. *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.
- Kraybill, Donald B., and Steven M. Nolt. *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- Kurosawa, Akira. *Dreams*. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2003.
- Lindsey, Hal, and Carole C. Carlson. *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970.
- Nozaki, Kiyoshi. *Kitsuné: Japan's Fox of Mystery, Romance & Humor*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1961.
- Ostwalt, Conrad. "Apocalyptic." In *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, edited by John Lyden, 368–83. London; New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Ostwalt, Conrad. "The End of Days." In *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, edited by William L. Blizek, 290–9. London; New York: Continuum, 2009.
- Pate, Alan Scott. *Japanese Dolls: The Fascinating World of Ningyo*. Tokyo: Tuttle Pub, 2008.
- Picken, Stuart D. B. *Historical Dictionary of Shinto*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2010.

Polkinghorne, John. "Eschatology: Some Questions and Some Insights from Science." In *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, edited by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, 29–41. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000.

Rafferty, Terrence. "Review of Dreams." In *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa*, edited by James Goodwin, 218–21. New York: G.K. Hall, 1994.

Stevenson, John. *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales*. Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005.

Thal, Sarah. "A Religion That Was Not a Religion." In *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History*, edited by Derek R. Peterson and Darren R. Walhof, 100–114. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Ury, Marian. *Tales of Times Now Past: Sixty-Two Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

Wójcik, Daniel. *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.