Dersu Uzala (1975), directed by Akira Kurosawa, the renowned Japanese filmmaker, in conjunction with Russia’s Mosfilm Studios, presents a seemingly simple human drama played out in an uncharted area of Siberia. With a screenplay based on Vladimir Arseniev’s 1941 nonfiction account of his experience with a nomadic trapper, Dersu Uzala was Kurosawa’s second color movie and his first movie outside Japan with non-Japanese actors.

The narrating voice we hear is that of Captain Vladimir Arseniev, a Russian geographer and cartographer, as he writes a memoir of two surveying expeditions in the rugged Siberian wilderness, the Ussurian taiga. Arseniev tells the story in a series of flashbacks of his days with Dersu Uzala, a man who lived in this remote region and with whom he formed an uncommon friendship. The movie traces this friendship and its effects on both men—one a cultured, well-educated scientist and military officer, the other a mountain man living alone in the forest in one of the world’s harshest environments.

The story of these two men and the complex emotional bond they form is told against a backdrop of spectacular natural beauty, with the changes of seasons in Siberia echoing the changes in their relationship. The film is a panoramic vision—like a series of beautiful photographs, each capturing the colors and textures of nature untouched by humankind. The camera focuses steadily on expansive scenes so that they appear to be still shots, moving only enough to capture the global movements of the characters. Because there are few close-ups of the characters, the human drama seems insignificant in relation to the eternal cycles of the natural world. Indeed, nature is one of the characters in the film: the powerful beauty of the Siberian landscape...
speaks for itself. This contrasts with some of Kurosawa’s earlier movies propelled by rapid, often furious editing in which action often ended in violence. Here, Kurosawa sets the tone with superb cinematography, as in the opening scenes in which the camera leisurely pans the Siberian landscape with its brilliant autumn foliage of oranges, yellows, and reds, as a bird shrieks in the distance.

The tranquil opening scene gives way to a scene of confusion in 1910 Korfovskaya, Siberia, as Captain Arseniev (Yuri Sal-omin) looks for the grave of Dersu Uzala (Maxim Munzuk). The scene is one of bustling business while a new settlement is carved out of the forest. Arseniev wanders about, lost and discouraged amid the chaotic desecration of the wilderness and his friend’s resting place. Despairing of finding the grave and left only with his memories, Arseniev wistfully says his friend’s name, “Dersu.”

In a flashback to 1902, Captain Arseniev, weary and walking with a slight left-leg limp, leads his military survey team of about a dozen men through a barren wilderness. At night the men are awakened by what sounds like an approaching bear. After a few tense moments during which the soldiers arm themselves, a small, wizened, bow-legged man walks calmly into camp and greets the captain as if they were old friends.

The soldiers acknowledge that Dersu is not a bear; yet his weathered face, rugged clothes, and rough manner make it clear that Dersu is not an ordinary man. After Dersu has settled himself near the fire, he lights his pipe—an odd, slightly comic sight, as if a bear were enjoying a smoke.

Dersu explains that he came across the tracks of the soldiers and followed the men to the camp. Clearly he had been watching the soldiers for some time before he joined them. When Arseniev offers Dersu food, he eats hungrily, without conversing, in an un-self-conscious manner closer to the ways of animals than to those of men.

Dersu, of the Manchurian branch of the Tungus-Manchurian tribe, is one of only 5,000 remaining hunters and fishermen who live in the remote Russian territory. He is without a home and without a family—his wife, son, and daughter died of small-pox years earlier. After their deaths, Dersu burned the house with their bodies in it and began his life alone in the wilderness.
When the soldiers ask Dersu his age, he ponders the question and admits he does not know, but that he has lived a long time. Outside of “man-made” time, Dersu lives in natural time, governed by the cycles of the seasons, of prey and predator, of drought and floods.

Captain Arseniev, recognizing Dersu’s strength and wisdom and his visceral knowledge of the forest, invites him to be their guide. Quixotically, Dersu says he needs to think it over. Though he has lived apart from other human beings and has shunned civilization for most of his life, he has not been able to escape his own humanity. Pulled by an inner imperative to rejoin the human race for reasons he does not understand, he agrees to guide the soldiers.

Initially, the soldiers laugh and poke fun at Dersu as paw prints and broken branches give him direction, and steam rising from bogs forecasts the weather. As his predictions are repeatedly borne out, the soldiers begin to view with awe his capacity to read nature’s signs. Having discovered a makeshift hut in the wilderness, Dersu repairs the roof with bark and then asks the captain for salt and matches, which he leaves in the newly repaired hut. When asked if he plans to return, Dersu replies, “No, it’s for the next person to come.” Men, like Dersu, have superimposed their own cycles on those of nature.

Fully aware of the power of nature, Dersu knows that he is an insignificant part of it. He lives a form of animism by which he imparts a spirit to all things. He refers to fire, water, and wind as “three mighty men” and the sun as “the most important man.” Dersu is part of a myth that he does not view as myth (i.e., as symbolic). By joining the soldiers, Dersu risks being torn out of the myth and becoming stranded alone in a world of symbols he cannot read.

Dersu’s is a world in which the nature of reality is intertwined with imagination, dreams, and spirit. He does not wake up from his dreams—dreamlife is continuous with waking life. In one scene he chants and makes offerings to wood he’s burning; his shouts are answered by the screams of a bird. Dersu later tells the captain, “I had a dream last night. The yurt is shaking and will soon fall down. My wife and kids are in the yurt hungry and cold, so I came here to give them some food.” For Dersu,
the spirit continues after death and can be kept alive; in effect, there is no death.

In another wilderness scene, the expedition encounters an old Chinese man sitting on his haunches, rocking in the doorway of a hut. The captain makes him an offering of water and bread, but the man is so disturbed when aroused from his stupor that he shakes violently, spilling the water. Dersu tells the captain that Li Tsung-Ping is 64 years old and for 40 years has lived alone in the wilderness after his brother stole his woman from him. Later, when the captain wants to invite Li Tsung-Ping to their campfire, Dersu tells the captain not to disturb the old man—to leave him alone with his thoughts. In this way Dersu seems to acknowledge the danger to which he exposes himself as a result of his growing ties to the captain. He risks being awakened from his animal-like dreamlife to face a human awareness of the pain of irreversible loss (Schneider, 2005a, 2005b, 2007)—an awareness of death that is absolute and devoid of the endless cycles of nature.

A critical turning point in the film occurs when, despite Dersu’s warnings, the captain insists that they go alone to the frozen Lake Khanka. They get lost in a blizzard as night sets in because Arseniev is so taken by the beauty of the lake that he cannot tear himself away. At the same time as the captain seems to become one with nature, Dersu is beginning to emerge from being part of it. Completely lost, they trudge in circles. Dersu warns, “After dark we are finished.”

Knowing every moment counts, Dersu takes charge, ordering the captain to “cut grass, work fast.” Together they feverishly cut reeds. But soon Arseniev loses consciousness, succumbing to cold and exhaustion. Using the tripod for a canopy holder, Dersu fashions a reed tent around the captain and himself.

In the morning, Dersu “delivers” the Captain from the shelter. As he removes the life-saving reeds, he says playfully, “Come bear, climb out of your den. The sun is up.” The two men give each other bear hugs and gleefully roll on the snow-covered ground. It is as if the two have met at that precise place that arches the border between Dersu’s dawning of human consciousness and Arseniev’s entry into an un-self-conscious world of nature.

They seem to have given birth to one another—each giving
something essential (and yet potentially very dangerous) to the other. Dersu delivers the captain to the world of raw, sensual, nonsymbolic rapturous union with nature that involved a close scrape with death. The emotionally reserved captain freely expresses joyful, unmediated elation, frolicking like a bear cub in the snow. The captain seems to have been drawn by a force stronger than human will into the nonhuman world. No longer is wilderness only terrain to be symbolized by maps and subdued by civilization. Conversely, the captain delivers Dersu into the world of self-conscious humanity, and of human bonds—intimacy and friendship of a uniquely human sort.

In the final scene of Part I, as the men discuss their plans, it is evident that Dersu and the captain must part. The captain asks Dersu to come with him to the city, but Dersu refuses. Sensing Dersu’s need to continue living alone, the captain offers him food and money, but Dersu asserts that he needs nothing (and no one). Before they part, he asks the captain for “a few cartridges,” a concession of sorts. The captain orders the soldiers to give to Dersu all their extra cartridges. The paradox is poignant: Dersu refuses to enter the human symbolic realm, but he is unable fully to resist.

As the scene ends, we see Dersu and the men parting at the recently constructed railroad track, which is now a gleaming steel line separating Dersu and Arseniev. When Dersu reaches the top of a hill, he turns back. He and the captain look at each other from the distance and fondly call out to each other, “Dersu,” and in reply, “Captain.”

Part II of the film begins 5 years later in the spring of 1907. Arseniev is again leading a surveying expedition. The soldiers are contending with the forces of Siberia’s spring thaw, slogging through waist-deep mud. The river heaves and cracks as ice breaks and huge chunks grind against one another in the torrent.

The captain has spent 3 months in the forest clearly hoping to run into Dersu when finally a soldier reports that he met a hunter in the woods who asked about their unit. The captain runs in the direction from which the soldier came, calling “Dersu”; and, shortly, in the distance, the reply, “Captain!”

As they rush toward each other, a huge fallen tree separates them. They run back and forth along the two sides of the fallen
trunk, panting and laughing, calling each other’s name, looking each other in the eye, and trying to touch each other. Then, in one of the most poignant scenes of the film, they meet at the end of the trunk and grasp hold of one another, the captain hugging Dersu’s head to his breast. Later, Dersu and Arseniev sit off to the side of the main campfire, sharing stories and laughing, while the men sing a song, perhaps a serenade for the reunited lovers.

Their reunion is clearly more than a simple meeting of old friends. Beyond the bond of friendship, the two men seem to have found in one another aspects of themselves that each of them has not fully experienced or expressed before. In finding Dersu again, the captain seems to have gained something essential to his vitality that he finds nowhere else. Similarly, Dersu is no longer fulfilled by his solitary life in the wilderness.

Eventually Dersu’s old age and failing health make him vulnerable and insecure. Along the trail, Dersu sees the tracks of a Siberian tiger stalking them. Later they see the tiger and Dersu yells at it to go away but it comes toward them. He shoots at it to warn it off, but then, as it races away, he drops his gun in shocked remorse and fears that he has harmed something sacred to Kanga—the spirit of the forest—who will now send another tiger to kill him. By joining the expedition, he has entered human time, with its endings dictated by death. Dersu is now a weakened and doomed human in the animal world.

From that day on, Dersu becomes morose and irritable. Coming upon a stag, the captain urges Dersu to shoot it, but the old man’s eyes fail him and he misses. Believing that Dersu is too old and frail to continue living in the forest, the captain invites him to come and live with him in the city of Khabarovsk.

Dersu’s fear of dying peaks on New Year’s Eve in the camp. A tiger passes by Dersu’s tent and, in terror, he throws burning sticks at it and yells, “The tiger’s come to kill me. Kanga doesn’t want me to live in the forest. He sent the tiger.” Dersu then thanks the captain for offering his home to him and agrees to go to Khabarovsk.

Because Dersu has re-entered the world of human connection and the inevitability of loss, the formerly revered tiger takes on a sinister meaning symbolizing Dersu’s death. Dersu has
found himself stranded outside of the myth in which he had been living. Prominently placed between the captain and Dersu, the tiger is the embodiment of Dersu’s conflicted awakening to human self-consciousness.

Once in Khabarovsk, Dersu is restless, looking like a caged animal. He feels confined in the house and wants to pitch a tent outside—symbolic of his futile wish to re-enter his wilderness dream state. Once out, it seems he can never return. He is neither a man with dignity nor an animal with cunning. Finally, Dersu says, “Captain, please let me go back to the hills. I can’t live in a city. I can’t breathe here.” The captain, who is at a loss to know how to make his friend happy, gets a new rifle and gives it to Dersu, telling him it is easy to aim even with bad eyesight. Dersu returns to the wilderness with the rifle.

In the penultimate scene, Arseniev receives a telegram: “Your visiting card found on a dead Goldi. Request your presence to identify the body, police station Koorkovsk, Railway Station.” Arseniev travels by train to Koorkovsk to identify Dersu’s body, which is being buried next to the railroad tracks. When the officer in charge asks if he knew him, Arseniev responds, “We were friends. And his name was Dersu Uzala, his occupation, a hunter.” The officer mentions how strange it was that Dersu did not have a rifle. Arseniev assures him there must have been a rifle, one of the latest models, because he gave it to him. But the officer says no rifle was found and speculates that someone killed Dersu for his fine rifle. Arseniev is stricken by the sad irony of Dersu’s death—a human killing utterly disconnected from the timeless cycles of nature.

The film ends as it began, with Arseniev mourning the loss of Dersu. At the grave, we hear the same music that the soldiers earlier sang as a serenade to the two reunited friends. The words of the song reflect the fate of the friendship: “My gray wing’d eagle—where have you gone?” The chorus replies: “I’m flying . . .” “You, my eagle with blue black wings, where have you been flying for so long”—“I was flying there over the mountains—where it all was silence.”

We are left with the questions ever-present in this film: What is it to be a man, to be a human, to be an animal, to know
one is mortal, to love other men and be loved by them, to retain one’s nonhuman animal nature, to be a good man?

In 1971, after Kurosawa experienced two film failures—he attempted suicide by slashing himself multiple times with a razor. Following his physical recovery, however, he assumed a different persona. He was more affable and social, granting interviews with the news media in stark contrast to his earlier, reclusive self. Shortly thereafter, finding no interest in Japan, he agreed to make *Dersu Uzala* in the Soviet Union, a movie he had long dreamed of making. The creative genius reflected in *Dersu Uzala*—which won the 1975 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film—was the outcome of Kurosawa’s dramatic personal change. Like Dersu, Kurosawa had become a social outcast, wandering in the wilderness of his mind without human connection. And like Dersu, his “catastrophic change” (Bion, 1965) led to a second entry into human life, with all of its complexities, ironies, and limitations.

REFERENCES


