Akira Kurosawa’s masterpiece ‘Ikiru’: Man, cancer and the strive to reach one single and rewarding aim in life.

Many let’s question ourselves as well tend to live their lives within patterns of routine. Working too much, reflecting too little and often too late.

But there are moments when things reach a turning point. And no doubt, the diagnosis of cancer can be such a critical moment. There are lots of books which describe human catharsis of that sort.

Many of the films which describe malignant disease in the West tend towards black romanticism. There is the loving couple that is torn apart or similar plots that often end in tears.

How different is this is 60-year-old film: ‘Ikiru’ (‘To Live’; 1952) by Akira Kurosawa (best known for his ‘Seven Samurai’ of 1954 or ‘Ran’ of 1985). This black and white film unveils man’s thoughtlessness in life if there were not a diagnosis of incurable cancer all of a sudden.

‘When faced with a death sentence, how will you choose to live out the rest of your days. And what if you do not possess even a single beautiful memory of love?’, is one of the initial subtitles of the film.

It is the story of the bureaucrat Kanji Watanabe (Takashi Shimura), a man of middle age. He stamps files, but he has not left a stamp on his own life. His wife is dead. His son and daughter-in-law seem only to be interested in his money, expecting funds after his death. And all of a sudden his death is near. Watanabe gets a diagnosis of end-stage stomach carcinoma which has always ravaged Far Eastern cancer epidemiology. Watanabe gets to wake up being confronted with the verdict he now has to live with.

What does a man do under such circumstances? He goes out and looks for diversion. This little man jumps into nightlife. But whatever he does seems inadequate in his situation and does not help to conquer the frightening knowledge of his end to come. A short friendship with a younger woman arises. She tells him that she loves to make toys for children. In her heart she feels as if she played with all the children who get her toys.

It is this disclosure of the woman’s dedication that alters Watanabe’s course. He remembers that there is an old project to turn a useless piece of land into a children’s playground. But the initiative has been blocked by lazy, resistant officials. The film’s hero suddenly puts all his energies into this project and wins. His life has become meaningful.

Seeing this old film which has been ranked among the best cinematographic works ever is a feat of the visual arts. You need not be a professional cineaste to understand the true master behind it, Akira Kurosawa. The pictures and scenes reveal the eye of a painter. Just like Henri Cartier-Bresson he also had a magical view of things and was able to convey it to the public.

In one of its most moving scenes, Watanabe sits on a children’s swing on the playground in falling snow and looks at this piece of successful struggle for others. This man has found peace. He has done something worthy at last.

It is the choice of this individuum that counts. Watanabe’s colleagues get to understand a little bit of his achievements, but fail to follow his path. Politicians quarrel over who should earn the honour for having had the playground built. Normal (?) life goes on.

The film won the ‘Special Prize of the Senate of Berlin’ at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1954. There even was a remake for TV in 2007 (years after Kurosawa’s death in 1998) with some modifications. The story of Kanji Watanabe does deserve to be remembered.

‘To Live’ what does it mean? What should it mean before time runs out? Together with the question of one’s past, present state and future (‘Where am I to go to?’ being the basic question of our existence). Akira Kurosawa has transformed it into a wonderful film (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mLrLHDdXHI).

Competing interests None declared.