

“One Blow”

A special foreword to Shinobu Hashimoto’s *Compound Cinematics: Akira Kurosawa and I* by Masato Kato, Chairman, Writers Association of Japan

If the most famous Japanese filmmaker in the world is Akira Kurosawa, then the most well-known Japanese screenwriter is Shinobu Hashimoto.

Shinobu Hashimoto is a screenwriter among screenwriters, a towering summit in the Japanese film world.

When his memoir about his relationship with Akira Kurosawa was published as *Compound Cinematics: Akira Kurosawa and I*, it created a buzz amongst us cinema types for being a masterpiece.

The book offers a behind-the-scenes look at the peerless screenwriting team that supported the Kurosawa picture. It recounts in detail the roles played by Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto, Ryuzo Kikushima, and Hideo Oguni, first-class movie men, what their “repertoires” were, and how they constructed a screenplay.

In addition to being an entertaining work, grabbing the reader’s heart and never letting go, it is an important document of film history.

The Hashimoto Screenplay’s appeal can be summed up in one word: ferocity.

Even Hideo Oguni, his fellow scenarist on Team Kurosawa, conceded that Mr. Hashimoto wrote not just with his hand but with his elbow. Such was Mr. Hashimoto’s authorial brawn, and no one could match the pressure he brought to bear on his pen-tip.

Meanwhile, Director Kurosawa said of the Hashimoto Screenplay that it was “covered in stakes,” meaning bets. Discerning that his manuscripts were filled not just with words but with game chips, the director called Mr. Hashimoto, a famous fan of cycling races, “the gambler of cinema.”

The Hashimoto Screenplay isn’t the product of sheer brawn. It’s composed according to his gambler’s intuition and meticulous calculations.

Because his screenplays are both intricate and dynamic, their climaxes unfold overwhelming power. They go far beyond merely striking our hearts. With a destructive force a magnitude higher akin to a nuclear blast, they smash our hearts to pieces.

The screenwriter Shinobu Hashimoto wrote Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* in 1950 and made his film world debut at the age of thirty-two. As you know, it went on to win the Golden Bear Award at the Venice Film Festival—the first time a Japanese work fetched the grand prize in

an international film festival.

In 1952, Mr. Hashimoto wrote *Ikiru*, and in 1954, *Seven Samurai*, participating in one Kurosawa picture after another. In just four years, no time at all, he stood at the summit of Japanese screenwriting. Following that, he took part in the collaborative scripting of Akira Kurosawa's *I Live in Fear* (1955), *Throne of Blood* (1957), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), and *Dodes'ka-den* (1970).

The name Shinobu Hashimoto is most strongly associated with the screenplays of Kurosawa films, but he also supplied scenarios for many other filmmakers.

Tadashi Imai's *Darkness at Noon* (1956), Masaki Kobayashi's *Seppuku* (1962), Satsuo Yamamoto's *The Great White Tower* (1966), Kihachi Okamoto's *Japan's Longest Day* (1967), Yoshitaro Nomura's *Castle of Sand* (1974), Shiro Moritani's *The Village of the Eight Graves* (1977)—these masterpieces, each considered the representative work of eminent filmmakers, were all written by Shinobu Hashimoto.

It's fair to say that only Shinobu Hashimoto has such a brilliant oeuvre as a screenwriter. He is a solitary figure.

Mr. Hashimoto's road to cinema opened up when he met the director Mansaku Itami.

When asked by Itami, his screenwriting mentor, what stance an adaptation required, he responded:

There's a cow.... I go to see it every day. In rain or shine... Standing in different spots, I watch it. And when I've discovered its weak spot, I open the gate and enter the pasture and with some sort of blunt object I fell it in one blow.

Then, using a sharp knife, he cuts the carotid artery and works with the blood that comes pouring out. What he needs isn't its shape or form, but only its fresh blood...

It was 1946, and young Hashimoto was only twenty-eight years old when he gave Mansaku Itami his take on the matter.

Twenty-eight years later, he took up the writing of the screenplay for *Castle of Sand* with Yoji Yamada.

Yoji Yamada felt that the original work was too complicated a story; perhaps it couldn't be turned into a film after all. Mr. Hashimoto showed him a passage in the novel that he'd underlined with a red pencil.

Those lines concerned an episode from the main character's past when he and his sickly father donned the clothing of pilgrims and wandered the country, begging.

This short description of a sad past was precisely the vulnerable spot in Seicho Matsumoto's original *Castle of Sand*. From there they spun the theme of "a man casting away his past for the sake of fame being avenged by that past."

Breaking the mold of a simple mystery movie, *Castle of Sand* grew into a magnificent human drama and an immortal masterpiece.

The original story was felled in one blow.

Another interesting bit is Yoshitaro Nomura's pronouncement that "For Mr. Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto was a man he should never have encountered."

Director Nomura even asserts that Kurosawa would have been better off without the masterpieces *Rashomon*, *Ikiru*, and *Seven Samurai*. If it weren't for them, he argues, the director would have pursued entertainment and become the king of world cinema, an amalgam of Billy Wilder and William Wyler, since he had that sort of talent. Nomura shrewdly points out that the Hashimoto Screenplay ended up injecting ideas, philosophy, and social relevance into the Kurosawa film and that the burden hindered the director's pursuit of the pure entertainment appeal of cinema thereafter.

This was probably stated pedantically, but his words include a compliment that the bejeweled masterpieces *Rashomon*, *Ikiru*, and *Seven Samurai* could not have been born without Shinobu Hashimoto's talent. The Hashimoto Screenplay's composed air was what Director Nomura desired above all. To me, it comes across as a love letter: *Write them for me.*

The personalities of the movie men who appear in this book are all depicted clearly. Like characters appearing in a scenario, they are "fleshed out" well. You can feel his respect towards his comrades at arms in the brush of his pen. Thanks to that gentle brush tip, the work is a pleasure to read.

Prone to illness, Mr. Hashimoto went in and out of hospitals, but he made a full recovery upon completing this book. It sounds like a lie, but for many years his lifestyle had involved writing, and his condition must have returned to what it had been in those days.

I came into contact with a hale Mr. Hashimoto at a lecture at Waseda University and on the set of a special program filmed for NHK Hi-Vision (2008), and even now I cannot forget my pleasant surprise.

Restored to health, Mr. Hashimoto began work on a revision of his screenplay, *I Want to Be a Shellfish*. Broadcast in 1958, it had been his first television drama, and for the film version that followed the year after, he took up a megaphone to make his directorial debut.

The drama and film were hits and received high praise—but not from Director Kurosawa or Ryuzo Kikushima.

I surmise that Mr. Hashimoto saw fit to revise it in order to remove a thorn

that remained lodged in his heart.

The rewritten screenplay uses the sea as a motif and focuses on the love of a married couple, substantially increasing the number of scenes. These include a razed Tokyo—hardly feasible back then before the advent of computer graphics technology. With details altered throughout the entire piece, it's a fairly major rewrite, a transformation that stands as a model for film remakes. The screenplay overcame half a century to return to the screen once again.

The remake of *I Want to Be a Shellfish* (2008) won an award based on fan voting in the 63rd Mainichi Film Concours, proving that Mr. Hashimoto was indeed an active screenwriter at more than ninety years of age.

It's a bravura feat worthy of a man who tirelessly wrestled the demon that is cinema and spectacularly brought it to its knees over and over again to bask in the adulation of audiences.

The epilogue contains the following sentences:

Even if there won't be a second or third Akira Kurosawa, there's something I want willing souls to inherit and attempt in future years. And that's the collaborative scripting that Akira Kurosawa practiced.

As a screenwriter, I take the passage to heart. I wonder if it wasn't to tell us this that Mr. Hashimoto offered up the book.

With its many revelations, the work isn't just for us screenwriters but a must-read for film fans and aspiring cineastes.

I have a framed picture of the two of us on the wall of the room where I work, taken in the entryway of the Hashimoto residence where I had gone to interview him for a film magazine. Moreover, the copy of *Compound Cinematics* that I brazenly had him autograph for my daughter, who wrote her graduation thesis on Shinobu Hashimoto the screenwriter, is our heirloom. My whole family are Shinobu Hashimoto fans.

To date, Mr. Hashimoto has produced seventy-three cinematic screenplays (two of which were for foreign films).

I'm looking forward to the seventy-fourth.

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