Nainita Madurai

ANTH 318

Analysis of Film Ikiru

10/07/2010

The film Ikiru follows the story of Watanabe-san, a middle-aged bureaucrat in Japan who finds out that he has terminal stomach cancer. Prior to learning about his stomach cancer, Watanabe-san has no valuable meaning to his life, and it is this realization that causes him to change. During the film, Watanabe-san realizes that dying has, in fact, given him the chance to live. His story is not only a critique of the bureaucratic system in Japan, but it also addresses the larger issue of what it means to make an individual life meaningful.

At first, Watanabe-san is depicted as a soul-less drone, carrying out the mundane functions of his job as a bureaucrat. He is described as a “mummy” by one of his co-workers because he is so lifeless in all that he does. Nothing he does is done with passion or even excitement. If a problem is brought to his attention he simply defers the problem to another department in the bureaucracy; this is just how it is, and no one challenges the system. He is so trapped in that way of life, that he does not realize how mundane and meaningless it actually is. That is until he finds out about his stomach cancer.

When Watanabe-san realizes that he has stomach cancer he is in shock and grief. He attempts to tell his son, Mitsuo, but is met with cold indifference. Watanabe-san, who believes that the purpose of his life for the past twenty years has been taking care of his son, now feels rejected by Mitsuo and he begins his quest to allow himself to live and die. Choosing to hide his illness from his son becomes important in the end of the movie, when Watanabe-san’s friends and family are piecing together his sudden change in attitude. Initially, he runs away and takes with him a large sum of money. His sense of time changes drastically. He has no need for future savings, why should he still be a miser? There is no need to set alarms, what is the point in waking up to go to work? There is no need to even sleep, why should he take pills to waste his valuable time? Time becomes vastly important to him and yet he feels rejected by it as well.

At the start, he uses his time by going out and indulging in gambling, clubs, bars, and the like, but this does not satisfy him. The alcohol he drinks, which is painful for him, is like a self-punishment for not living his life the way he wanted. However, after the long night of indulgence Watanabe-san has a new hat; this metaphorically makes him into a new person with a new attitude by changing a very characteristic aspect of him. His next false start comes after he spends time with his youthful co-worker. She is so bubbly and full of laughter and life. He tries to live vicariously through the girl because he sees so much youth and joy in her. He envies that joy, but he realizes that even that cannot make his life mean something. Eventually, the girl indirectly helps him to understand that life is not only about having joy and passion, but also about making good things happen and using your time to help others live the life they want.

Armed with his new hat and attitude, Watanabe-san takes on the playground project. The playground was built in a neighborhood in which cesspools had formed on the street. The people of the neighborhood had originally complained and were deferred to the whole bureaucracy before being sent right back to Watanabe-san’s department. Watanabe-san, with his new found sense of purpose, saw the whole project through. He worked with the people in the neighborhood to understand what they wanted and they, in turn, treated him like a father, even a savior. He actively pursued the cause and even though others took credit away from him, his co-workers eventually pieced together his courage and determination in the face of adversity. The interaction among the friends and family of Watanbe-san at his funeral shows that Japanese people value the worth of someone’s life after they die. They commented less on the fact that he *had* a good life and more on what good he *did* during his life. Was his death honorable? Did he achieve valuable and meaningful things in his life? Asking these questions seemed to help the people at his funeral understand how their own lives should be lived, regardless of whether they are terminally ill or not.

One of the social and political issues this movie addresses is the failure of the Japanese bureaucracy to get things done and to make things happen that are helpful to society. According to the movie, the bureaucracy is a “mockery of democracy” and elected officials only do things so that they can get reelected. There is so much red tape and there are so many people to go through that change is hard to come by. Above all, the individuals in the bureaucracy do not stand up against it when they have the power to. They follow the norms and continue to live mundane and unsatisfying lives. Watanabe-san broke the mold and his co-workers could never do such things; this is the sad truth of the film.

Ikiru is more than just a film about living each day like it is your last. So many movies teach that people must live life to the fullest, but they never explain what a full life is. Watanabe-san’s quest for the meaning of life reflects both Japanese cultural values and also the values of human beings as a whole. The notions of creating life from death are transcendent across cultures. Often, people view dying as a chance to do the things you have never done before. That is why people create bucket lists and live impulsively towards the end of their lives. Watanabe-san understood that there was more to life than fulfilling Epicurean desires. What does it matter if the only person’s life you impacted was your own? A full life is that which has the love and respect of others, but most importantly, a full life is a life that has given life back.