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Akira Kurosawa's Dodes'ka-den is the most beautiful movie in town this week

by **Ben Sachs**

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Dodes'ka-den

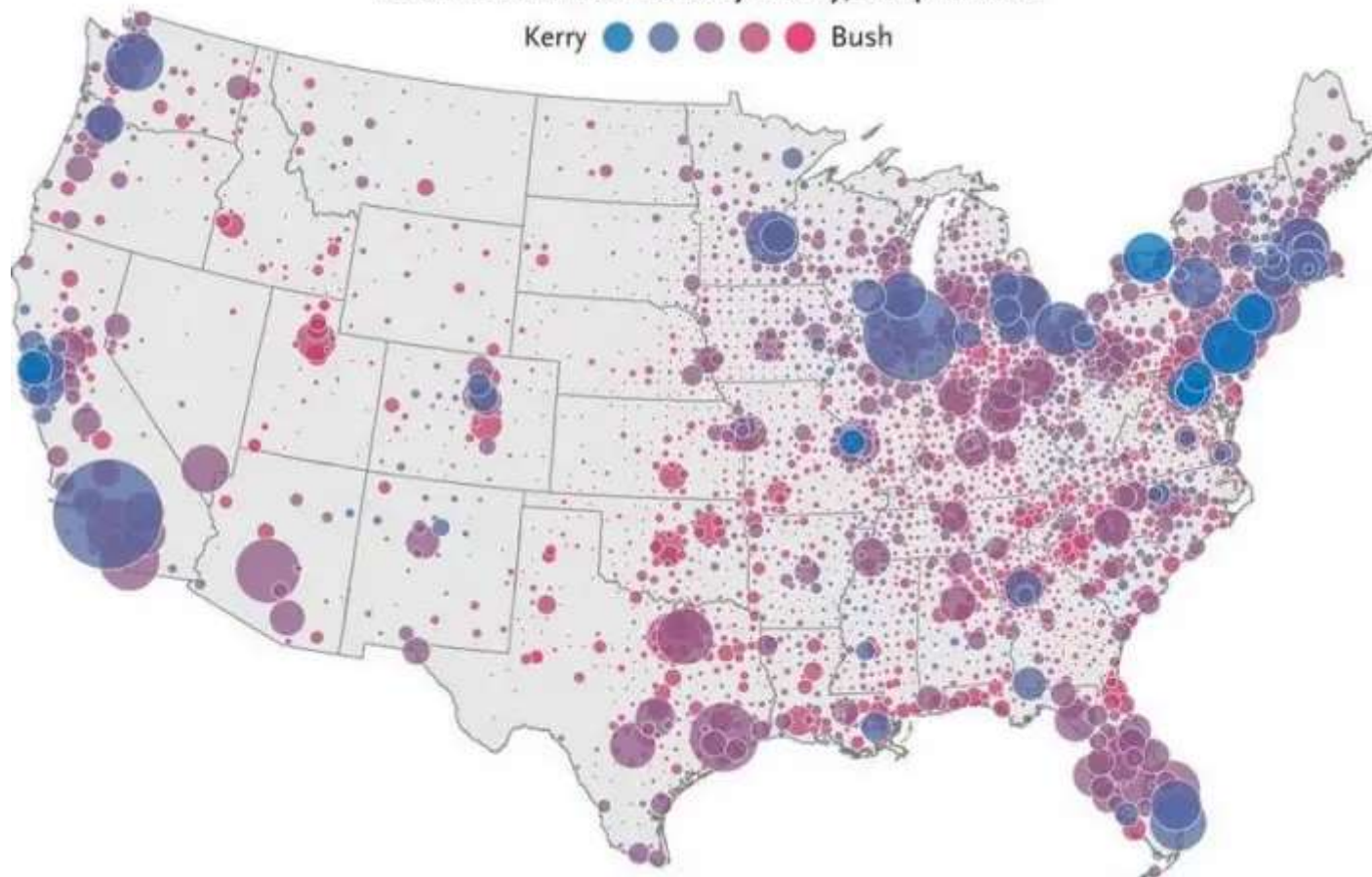
Dodes'ka-den (1970), which screens from 35-millimeter this Sunday at 7 PM at Doc Films, might be described as Akira Kurosawa's most Italian film. The exuberant, if grimy, depiction of lower-class life sometimes recalls Pier Paolo Pasolini, while the episodic structure, broad humor, and sentimentality evoke the films of Federico Fellini. And for some of the exterior shots, Kurosawa and crew members painted their physical surroundings so that they would appear especially colorful, a technique that Michelangelo Antonioni had tried out in *Red Desert* (1964). Yet for all these commonalities, *Dodes'ka-den* remains intensely personal; its central theme of finding refuge in dreams reflects the joy Kurosawa experienced in

making movies. It's not a perfect work—some of the episodes feel simplistic or overly sentimental—but it contains enough splendid moments to make it worth seeing, especially on celluloid.

The film takes place in a shantytown constructed on a garbage dump on the outskirts of Tokyo. It has no principal character but rather alternates between several stories about the town's various inhabitants. In one, a pair of housewives, fed up with their drunk husbands, switch places, only to find their spouses don't even notice. In another, a kindly doctor convinces a desperate man not to commit suicide. Some characters, like a developmentally disabled teenage boy who spends his days pretending to be a trolley conductor, never leave the shantytown; others, like a jobless father and his young son, venture into the city to beg for food. The latter characters pass the time imagining the mansion they hope to live in (which Kurosawa realizes in cutaway shots), and this motif rhymes with the teenager's dream of driving a trolley.

“This film was Kurosawa's first in color, and he doesn't let you forget it,” Dave Kehr sneered in his [Reader capsule review](#). “The tonalities are so bold, so broadly symbolic, and so spectacularly deployed that they easily overwhelm the tiny sentimentalities of the story.” I agree that the colors of *Dodes'ka-den* are spectacularly deployed, but I don't think they're broadly symbolic. Yes, Kurosawa identifies certain characters with individual hues (the swapping wives are identified with yellow and red, for instance), and the film is rife with primary colors. At the same time, *Dodes'ka-den* contains many muted colors as well: in fact, they often compete for one's attention in the same shot as bold colors. Kurosawa doesn't always seem in control of the color scheme of the movie; he just wants to use as many colors as he can. In this regard, one might appreciate *Dodes'ka-den* as an experimental film as well as a narrative one.

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Dodes'ka-den

The director had wanted to work in color for several years before making *Dodes'ka-den*. Following the success of *Red Beard* (1965)—the film that Kurosawa believed capped the first phase of his career—he began to plan what would be his first film in color, an American-set thriller called *The Runaway Train*. Despite completing the script and storyboards, Kurosawa was unable to secure funding for the project, and it fell through. He tried again to work with Hollywood when he agreed to direct the Japanese segments of the war epic *Tora! Tora! Tora!* but was fired from that project after two years of work. When a few tabloids reported that Kurosawa had gotten fired because of a mental breakdown, he decided to respond to the rumors by returning to work immediately to prove he was still sane.

By most accounts, Kurosawa was very happy on the set of *Dodes'ka-den* (documentary footage of the shoot show the director merrily drawing several of the pictures of trains that the developmentally disabled teenager hangs on his walls). He was also productive, completing the shoot in just 28 days despite having agreed to make it in 44. Kurosawa's pleasure comes through not only in the expressive use of color, but in the sympathetic characterizations. Even when the film threatens to become grating, one knows that the director's heart is in the right place. *Dodes'ka-den* may be fanciful in its depiction of poverty, but this comes from a desire to humanize people marginalized by society. 📺

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