

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

Seven Samurai (1954)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

'Seven Samurai' is well described as an 'epic samurai action film.' One sees at once the blend of archaic with techno modern expressive in the film. For centuries, from the twelfth until their dissolution in the nineteenth century, the samurai represented a more or less distinct and distinguished military class within Japanese society, a class characteristically invested as guardians of regional shoguns. While this general description is broad and loose--the power of the samurai experienced many ups and downs--it applies strongly to the view of the samurai as the Japanese people lived it. For the ordinary Japanese the samurai were a warrior class deserving of consistent respect. The active dimension of the samurai is highlighted by their proclivity for semi mechanized military gestures, and especially the manipulation of their long swords, emblems of prowess and power.

Auteur Kurosawa went hell bent for leather into the present film. As usual with this director, a magisterial director- centered action cascaded forth. Money had to come first, and came; the film was the most expensive in Japanese film making to date. After three months of pre production. the work on this film had demanded more than 148 shooting days, and had more than quadrupled its initial budget. The production company, shocked at this expense, twice stopped work on the project, but each time Kurosawa 'went fishing,' knowing that the company had too much at stake in the film's progress to reverse course. And so the money came--and paid back with interest in what many consider the most brilliant work in cinema history. But the budget was only the start, quickly followed by what Kurosawa considered the heart of a film. Its script--the crucial editing job. An example of his editing practice will suffice.

While other directors would characteristically wait until shooting had been completed, and then begin the script editing job, Kurosawa would when possible assemble his editorial team nightly, after each day's shooting, to work on the writing of that day's shoot. Budget and editing were key elements of getting a Kurosawa film off the ground, but were still only a small part of the whole job Kurosawa took on himself. Deeply interested in the literary dimension of his scripts, Kurosawa was always on the lookout for new texts--either foreign or Japanese--to adapt for film. This literary drive put him in close touch with the Japanese writers community, as it long had long with the Japanese music scene. In that scene Kurosawa worked extensively with his good friend, Fumio Hayasaka, until the composer's death at the age of forty one. Nothing could better illustrate Kurosawa's interest in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* than the tracklist of the musical segments contributed by Hayasaka to *Seven Samurai*: this composer and student of classical Japanese music, contributed thirty nine musical segments to the film, for a total length of just over 62 minutes, each piece supporting the onward film flow for a period of less than one to as much as five and a half minutes. The result is a powerfully germane gallery of fluctuating echoes off the wall of the carefully edited screen text.

Film The actual filming of *Seven Samurai* forced Kurosawa to take advantage of the liberal policies and creative freedom provided by his studio, Toho Studios. He used telephoto lenses, which were rare in 1954, and arrangements with multiple cameras, which could be placed at different positions in the camera field, modifying the audience's field of vision of what was being photographed. Wider fields of filmable action are made possible, and the audience's sense of inclusion in the action is enhanced. The director's ability to choreograph complex shoots, from a wide diversity of angles, was greatly enlarged.

Historical Background It is claimed that the present film, with its dynamic, overflowing energy and masses of armed riders and horse, set a style for the Hollywood blockbusters of the mid 20th century. (WW 2 can easily have played its part in the cultural inter-familiarity of Japan and the United

States, precisely at the time of the film before us, the mid-fifties.) Themes within that kind of dynamism certainly played out cross culturally, for instance the theme of gathering an heroic mission team to go forth against very concrete evil, central to such films as *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) or *Saving Private Ryan* (1998.)

SYNOPSIS

A bandit gang, down on their luck and hungry, decide on a plan to raid a mountain village, just as the harvest is complete, to slaughter the villagers and run off with the grain. However the villagers get wind of this plan, and make their own plans. They follow the advice of their village elder; gather a team of samurai to protect you, and make sure you feed them well. From a nearby village a master swordsman samurai is found, and recruited, until eventually a small team of samurai are assembled. As they get to know each other, the samurai and the villagers become friends.

We get to know the samurai, individually; a romance springs up with one of the town girls, one of the samurai reveals that he is the son of farmers, and so it goes as the two diverse communities become familiar with one another. The samurai begin to train the villagers in fighting with bamboo spears, and three bandits are spotted, two killed; their hideaway is revealed by the third, and set fire to, in a brutal night attack. From that point on a sequence of deadly skirmishes take place, in the course of which the samurai help the villagers to fortify their village with a moat and ramparts.

Some bitter final skirmishes transpire. When the bandits discover the moat and fortifications they burn the village's outlying houses, and they burn the mill belonging to the headman, Gisaku. The old man refuses to leave his home, and is killed, although many of the bandits are massacred along with him.

The bandits have three muskets among them--strong weapons for the place and time. A couple of muskets are captured, but in the ensuing skirmish several of the bandits break into the village. Several villagers, including the headman, are killed; in what ensues, the remaining bandits are killed.

The last shots show us three of the samurai standing on the funeral mounds of their fallen comrades. They are watching the joyful villagers, in the distance, planting the next year's crop. At the end one of the samurai walks across the screen, in front of the others, on his way to join the villagers. It is his way of saying that he is in solidarity with the villagers, and with the agricultural traditions that, still in the mid twentieth century, made up the majority of the productive force of the Japanese economy. The final signature of the film is historical, signalling the capstone ending of the heroic period of Japanese culture, the long waning samurai tradition. For all that, however, the honorable martial role of the samurai is upheld in this film against the law and orderlessness of the bandits, who stand only for plunder.

CHARACTERS

Kambei Shimada, tough veteran *ronin*--unattached samurai--who is the de facto leader of the samurai.

Gorobey Katayama, second in command to Kambei; excellent archer.

Shichiroji, old friend of Kambei.

Kyuzo, the most severe of the samurai, a great swordsman.

Heihachi, the wittiest and most amiable of the samurai; great for sustaining group morale.

Okamoto, the still untried son of a wealthy family; with hesitance Kambei takes him on as a disciple.

Kikuchiyo, the director's star performer handles this role, that of a volatile and hot tempered character,

The remainder of the cast-- villagers, bandits and others--are for the most part stereotypes, like those in the *Characters* of Theophrastus (371--287 B.C.) or in the *Mimes* of Herondas (3rd cent. B.C.), ancient Greek work that lies close to the origins of literary character making. The cast will be made up of stock characters, like the 'hotheaded villager,' 'a timid old man,' 'the bandit chief.' the 'bun seller,' or one of a number of 'coolies.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

As we know, the present film is bursting with action and pressure, the pressure of harvesting, the pressure of preparing for the advent of the bandits, and finally the pressure of fortifying the village against the bandits. There is little breathing space between the cracks in the action, and that space is filled with the trampling horse riders and heavy armed, usually sword carrying foot soldiers. There is no main or three dimensional character

THEMES

Mutual Support It is in the traditional nature of the samurai, as it was for the knights of mediaeval Europe, to lend support to the needy or underprivileged, and especially, as in the instance featured in this film, when the work being defended, as in the present instance, is essential food production, on which the culture as a whole depends. Doubtless there is a story to tell about the bandits as well, but their desire to share remains unproven. .

Agriculture as Centrum The core action depicted in the film is agricultural, labor relying on the bounty of the land. That labor opens and closes the film, that labor brings joy and singing at the end of the film. The director knows how to probe into the universal in human experience. At the film's end we realize that we have been given an adroit lesson in social structures and their inherent conflicts.

The eternal of village existence. In the background of the film's steady pulse of motion goes on the millennial rhythm of agricultural life; fields are being curried and trimmed, fruits gathered, and a father is protecting his daughter until the time when she will be able to marry properly, and sustain a new generation of young, who will carry on the rhythm which sustains them all.

Inventiveness All the groups brought into play, in this film, are working out their lives by the inventiveness they can bring to bear on the limiting conditions of their own time. Of foremost importance, to each of the three groups before us--villagers, samurai and bandits--is the ingenuity to devise clothing, armor, and weaponry from the raw materials available to them.

Action as pleasure Throughout this rushing and restless film we find that pure on pouring motion is a delight in and of itself. Kurosawa is a master of joining the onrush of armies and weapon bearing horsemen, with the intricacies that make these onrushes convincing, For example he enables us to inspect the clouds of dust which swirl between and around the horses' hooves in a cavalry charge.

SCENES

Villagers overhear talk that bandits are preparing to raid their community, but only after the harvest has been concluded. They fear that their year of farm labor will have been in vain.

Villagers consult and decide they need group protection. Through the grapevine they get in touch with individuals, in nearby townships, who are or who have been samurai, members of that traditional military support group whose long benign tradition has made them a national resource.

From their side a half dozen retired or still aspiring samurai take an interest in the villagers' case. The villagers and samurai consult on strategies for warding off bandit attacks.

The samurai trick a bandit group into raiding the village, then ambush the raiders and kill two.

The captured raider reveals details of the raider hideaway, and the samurai make plans to set fire to the raider camp. In the ensuing blaze horses and many raiders are consumed.

Meanwhile the samurai are arming the villagers with sharp bamboo weapons, as effective defensive strategies.

Scenes of pathos crop up throughout the village, as a fiery counter-attack from the bandits destroys houses, shrines, and lives.

Relations deepen between the samurai and the villagers; numerous scenes of confidence show Kurosawa's sense of the shaky but intense relation that is starting to bond the two diverse social groups.

The bandits possess three muskets--the only firearms around. A number of farmers are killed by this newfangled machinery. We are watching an account of historical events transpiring on the cusp of modern history.

In a discussion among the samurai, after all the killing is over, one of the samurai observes that the 'only winners of this battle were the villagers.'