

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, PhD

## Sunshiro Sugata (1943)

Akira Kurosawa

### OVERVIEW

It is always awesome to work into the earliest achievements of a master creator--this is Kurosawa's first self-directed film--- and just that can be said of this work of Kurosawa. This tale he tells us is simple, but the way he tells it us already unique. The main character, Sanshiro, is in one sense a cut out hero from the martial arts tradition, but in a deepening move Kurosawa makes this malleable figure into a vehicle of the search for spirituality and self-discipline.

**Auteur** Kurosawa creates the tale of a talented but wayward young man who goes off to the city to learn the skills of the art of jujitsu. To accomplish this he heads for one of the city's new martial arts academies. Thus opens the conventional, and promising narrative, but from the outset we see the innovative procedures which are destined to mark Kurosawa's cinematography: the use of wipes, which erase time and scene; abruptly changing camera speeds, which require recalibration of attention from the audience; the use of changing weather pattern, as mood shapers and direction givers. Kurosawa is from the beginning of his movie career highly sensitized to the filmed world as it is experienced by the audience. We need to remember, as we rehearse these details of the creator's early work, that he had begun his creative life as a painter, highly sensitive to the changing visual values of the empirical world.

**Film** Kurosawa's values doubtless range across the palette of sensibilities he met in his first career, where he unfolded as a painter. He was a dramatist at the palette, gifted at deploying washes of sky and turbulent cloud movements, yet with a precise, even finicky, eye for such details as the light glint on horses' hooves, or the maddening force of sand and rough dirt, as they cascade back down the mountainside, taking a rider fatefully downward with them.

**Historical background** Kurosawa was drawn by what he heard of the novel behind this film, but for what seemed to him ages, he could not find a copy of the text. He combed the Tokyo used book shops for months until finally he came across a copy of the text he wanted. He read it voraciously, as was his way, and immediately proposed the script to his producer, who affirmed his choice. This small episode gives us an insight into the always essential literary side of Kurosawa, who was to be noted, later, for the late night text-analysis sessions he would hold with his crew, after each day's shoot. He was above all a literary film maker, and had first of all to be convinced by the script he was working from.

### PLOT

Sanshiro is an intense but stubborn young man, determined to find himself a position with the prime jujitsu academy of his city. He looks in vain for some time, until at last he finds an accomplished master Shagaro Yano, from the Sudokan Judo school; after observing this master ward off a gang of bullies single handedly, Sanshiro decides this is the master for him. Sanshiro is awed by this performance, but knows that he himself lacks the self-discipline to bring about such success. Finally, disgusted with himself, Sanshiro leaps into an icy lotus pond, where he stays night and day, until he sees a lotus blossom opening; he takes this as a symbol of his own self-realization. He hurries to Yano, his model, and asks forgiveness for his lack of self-awareness and discipline. Realizing that he has simply relying too much on simple muscle memory, he soon becomes the leading student at Yano's school.

The chief event before the city's martial arts community is to choose the best school for training the local police academy. A series of competitions is arranged, and in Sanshiro's first fight off he kills his opponent, forcing him to crash in a corner. A formal competition is then set up between the two schools in competition. Murai represents the opposition to Yano's school. Mutai is to fight Sanshiro. But despite his

mental fight- device, of thinking about his beloved daughter Sayo, he is forced to throw in the towel. Sanshiro overwhelms him. Afterwards, Sanshiro meets and makes friends with his defeated opponent. And begins to feel romantic toward Sayo. Here, however, he runs into another judo master who is also in love with Sayo. Higaki challenges Sanshiro to a fight to the death, and loses, after suffering intolerable internal damage. With these victories under his belt, Sanshiro heads for Yokohama, where there are larger fish to fry. He promises Sayo that he will return to her at the end of his journey.

## CHARACTERS

*Sanshiro Sugata* An ambitious, if stubborn, young man from the provinces, who has his eyes set on acquiring fame as a jujitsu master at one of his town's local academies. He presses boldly ahead with his ambition, and nevertheless meets one challenge which he cannot overcome. He lacks self-discipline and cannot control his emotions. The tale concerns the new powers he is able to master within himself, and the conquests made possible by his mastery. It is important to note, however, that the character of Sanshiro is one dimensional, no great surprise given that the present script is Kurosawa's first solo cinematic effort.

*Shogoro Yano* The judo master to whom Sanshiro turns as he seeks to strengthen his own self disciplinary powers. This master remains above the martial arts fray. And is a steady support for Sanshiro. He refuses simply to praise Sanshiro, after the young man's display of self-achievement.

*Sayo Murai* The daughter of the mighty jiu jitsu fighter who challenges Sanshiro. Sanshiro falls for her and vows to return to her after his adventures. She gives off little of her own personality, is essentially the type of the 'local beauty queen.'

*Higaki* Sanshiro's greatest struggle, in which he emerges triumphant over this giant of Judo. He induces such brutal internal injuries on this judo master, that the man is incapacitated for life. Note, Kurosawa spares us nothing of the raw brutality of the martial arts, regularly commenting, of the defeated challengers to Sanshiro, that they end up as cripples, with their internal organs totally rearranged.

*Hansuko Murai* Owner of rival Judo School, destroyed by Sanshiro in furious battle. The father of the beauty, Sayo.

## THEMES

**Ambition** Sanshiro's original drive, and the force we see behind the various judo or jujitsu warriors in the film, is ambition, which comes here to mean a desire for accreditation as a certified master of judo or jujitsu at a local academy. Such ambition is circumscribed but intense like the burning ambition of a star basketball player on an Iowa high school team. One does not play for the eyes of the world, but for one's own image of perfection.

**Combat** The ambition to which we referred above translates directly into the muscles, though it does activate or replicate the work of the mind. For a long time Yano simply scorned the jiu jitsu pretensions of his admirer, Sanshiro, whose strength was obvious while his self-discipline was lacking. Yano was inviting Sanshiro to prove that there are other dimensions to his personality.

**Self-knowledge** Sanshiro lacks only self-confidence and self-discipline, when he sets off on his venture to become a great judo master. At first he has no idea what he is lacking. He lives by his muscles, rushes forward into a fight, and makes his way to the end without strategy. It begins to occur to him, however, that he needs a better understanding of what leads to his wins or losses. At this point, when he is eager to impress Yano with his total potential, he determines to convince Yano of his personal richness.

**Spiritual action** It seems a commonplace of spiritual literature that spirituality ultimately requires a physical counterpart. Sanshiro knows that he has this gift of higher achievement, or he believes he does, but still has to prove himself in action. This he does, or believes he does, by jumping in the icy pond

outside Yano's Academy. It is a brute act, with nothing to prove except endurance, yet in the end he prevails because he sticks with it until the lovely lotus beside him blooms. He receives at last the reserved attention of Yano. Even at that, however, he comes in for a tongue lashing, from one of Yano's associates, to the effect that his spirituality has too much self-display in it.

**Romance** Sanshiro has a soft spot for feminine beauty, and Sayo attracts him, after he has killed her father in a mortal combat. By the end of the film the lovers have sworn to be true to each other. Which may be the place at which to remind ourselves that this is Kurosawa's first self-directed film, and that, playing flatly into the martial arts tradition, he willingly lets himself go into external action. Think ahead to how a more mature Kurosawa will handle character and action. Think of the action packed *Yojimbo* (1961), in which the main character comes to a crossroads, both in space and in life, and must decide whether to go on his way or to clear out evil. His slaughtering actions are as uncompromising as those of Sanshiro, but are carried out along the lines of intention and thought.

## SCENES

Sanshiro, eager for acceptance as a fine jujitsuist, seeks out the respect and approval of Yano, a judo master who runs an academy in Sanshiro's own town.

One day Sanshiro comes upon Yano defending himself single-handedly against a rough bunch, and Sanshiro deeply admires the prowess and cool with which Yano disperses the thugs.

Sanshiro returns to his old style of street fights and hot tempered encounters, without making much progress on his truly martial abilities.

Determined to change his psychological profile, Sanshiro undertakes the dramatic 'spiritual' risk of jumping into and over-nighting in a frozen lily pond outside Yano's Academy.

Sanshiro enables himself to excel at Yano's school, and is chosen to fight it out with the top judoist of another academy, to determine who will serve as the training ground for the new Police Academy.

In a final appearance, challenged to go against their school's greatest adversary, Sanshiro goes after Murai, the rival school's director, whom he finally drives to the ground, causing nearly fatal internal injuries. After the match Sanjiro makes friends with this defeated rival.

Sanjiro is attracted to Murai's daughter, Sayo. But he is not alone. Another jujitsu master fights with Sanshiro for the affections of the beauty.

After defeating Higaki, inflicting dreadful internal damage on the man, Sanshiro prepares for his new assignment, in the large city of Yokohama.

Sayo escorts Sanshiro to the train taking him to Yokohama.

He swears to her that he will return to her at the end of his travels.