

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sanjuro (1962)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

Sanjuro is a sequel to Kurosawa's 1961 *Yojimbo*, and in many ways resembles that film. Each of these films introduces a daring, fast and free shooting hero type who comes down pretty heavily on the side of order and virtue, and boldly takes on the assignment of 'draining the swamp.' (This theme in Kurosawa reads off his susceptibility to faultless chivalric westerns American films, particularly to those of John Ford, where bravourea and virtue vie for first place. In *Yojimbo* a wild-west samurai type, coming upon a cross roads town, avoids the opportunity simply to keep on going and decides to let himself be diverted into town. There he finds himself face to face with a rat's nest of local conflicts, which demand his undivided attention. Ultimately he 'cleans up Dodge City,' but not without paying the penalty of all Idealism. Or is it Idealism? Is it simply cleaning the landscape of filth, wherever that landscape presents itself? (The question of the philosophical backdrop implicit in *Yojimbo* or Sanjuro's behavior is vexed, for one can plausibly read these two films as the most self-revelatory of Kurosawa's works, as points at which we feel that the guiding voice is that of Kurosawa himself. It is arguable that the behaviors of both *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro* are existentialist, derive from solving life's puzzles one at a time and not from approaching the life issue as a whole to be viewed from outside. This Imputation of existentialism to the thinking and acting of *Yojimbo* is equally easy to apply to the life course of *Sanjuro*. The two films, which mirrored one another as box office hits following one another in successive years, are unique in their startlingly clear author portrayal.)

Auteur Kurosawa creates in a wide variety of styles, or personae, but we rarely feel that he, in person, is us speaking to us. In many of his most admired films he speaks to us through a broadly historical-mediaeval voice; sometimes in the voice of a hardened contemporary city voice—as in his *films noirs*; sometimes—in *One wonderful Sunday, Dodeskaden*—as a simple and alert urban dweller; but rarely, as in the two films before us—as a philosophically directive and explicit voice. Why emphasize this point? Why do we want to identify what might in a certain way seem the most 'authentic' voice of Kurosawa? The answer is doubtless unexpected. In searching through the voices of Kurosawa we become freshly aware of the pantomime skills of this artist. When it comes to the total achievement of Kurosawa, we must be struck by how essentially broad it is, and with what abandon he devotes himself to a multiplicity of themes and events.

Film The process of making the present film is evidence of Kurosawa's flexibility in creation. The director took a double inspiration for his film, and found new consequences for the present work. The director's original impulse came from Shigoro Yamamoto's novel, *Hibi Heian, Peaceful Days*, of which the present film was intended to be a direct adaptation, Kurosawa had given full speed ahead to this plan, when a new factor entered his planning. The success of *Yojimbo* made itself evident on the Japanese market, and both the director and studio concluded that the present film, *Sanjuro*, should be pretty directly modelled on its forerunner, *Yojimbo*. *The basic theme, of the swashbuckling moral cleanser, was preserved in Sanjuro, but with more comic elements, and a very different local political scenario.* In the sequel the leading figure is a masterless samurai, as in *Yojimbo*, and maintains his anonymity in the same way as did his predecessor. When asked his name, *Yojimbo* looks to nature outside him, and announces that his name is *mulberry*, while in *Sanjuro* he looks around and announces that his name *Iscamelia*. The most important change between the two films, is that *Yojimbo* serves up to us a Wild Western style hero, shall we say a version of the hero of *High Noon*, while *Sanjuro* does his world-cleansing in a mediaeval samurai setting. Despite the antique setting, in *Sanjuro*, the comic element is stronger in *Sanjuro*. The seasoned ronin continually stumbles, in his effort to 'clean up Dodge City,' due to the ineptitude and clumsiness of the nine locals whose job is to help him, and to help him help them.

Historical background The change from Wild West to Mediaeval samurai, in the move from *Yojimbo* to *Sanjuro*, is a good reminder to us, that film is a variable artifice, and can be reconfigured in the twinkling of an eye. In fact the deftness of the Kurosawa camera team makes scenic transformations the name of the game, and is in fact a major element in Kurosawa's flexibility as a director. From the outset of his career he gives substance to the Roman adage, *ars est artem celare*, *art is all about hiding art*, excelling both at exquisite visual metaphors—as when the two week end lovers meet and flirt on opposite sides of a railway stanchion (*One wonderful Sunday*)--- or in breathtaking scenes of castles exploding in flame, while troops of cavalry pound the air into tidal waves of sun blasted dust, as in *Kagemusha* or *Throne of Blood*. The wonder of Kurosawa is that he can prove his mastery equally, in each of these scenes.

PLOT

Nine young samurai set up to investigate the Lord Chamberlain for corruption, after he has torn up the document in which they registered their complaints of municipal fraud. As the nine plotters make their action plans, urging the superintendent to help them, they are overheard by a passing ronin, who advises them not to trust the super. He, the ronin, concludes that the Lord Chamberlain, Mutsuta, and his family are in danger, and he decides to stay and help the man. We have here the kind of gratuitous action plan that springs forth the events of *Yojimbo*, and that stamp the Existential seal on the thought and action of the present protagonist.

The samurai head for the house of the Chamberlain Mutsuta, to keep him from harm, but discover that he has been abducted, while his family is imprisoned in their house. With Sanjuro's help, the imprisoned servants of the Chamberlain's house get the guards drunk, and free the Chamberlain's family. The group hide in an adjacent cottage; the lady tells Sanjuro he kills too much; then she asks for his name, to which he replies, looking out the window, 'thirty year old camelia,' concealing his identity appropriately. Meanwhile Sanjuro befriends the most corrupt of the city council, Hanbei—who not long after finds out the tricks being played against him; he hurries away to gather reinforcements. A prolonged struggle ensues, between Hanbei and Sanjuro, who find themselves on the edge of a duel; in the course of it Sanjuro kills Hanbei, to the great delight and applause of his samurai buddies. To the surprise of that ultimately hapless crew, with whom we became acquainted at the beginning of the film, Sanjuro reproaches his allies, reminding them that we are all nothing more than 'a sword unsheathed,' and assuring them that he will kill them too if they try to follow him.

CHARACTERS

Sanjuro. The head samurai, who directs the village's hapless samurai discontents.

Hanbei. The leader of the forces of corruption in the village.

Mutsuta. The Chamberlain, represents the dignity of good order in the village.

Various of original nine protestors against corruption

Assorted townsfolk.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sanjuro is the dominant figure, a foe of corruption—which he tries to extirpate in the present film-- a mystery man who will identify himself only as 'thirtty year old camelia,' and in the end a killer who condemns killing. He is Mr. Cool, quick of repartee, tricky in fooling the band of the corrupt, and superior—guiding the original band of nine samurai as though they were naughty children.

THEMES

Mastery Sanjuro is by nature an executive personality, a ronin who takes charge of difficult situations, goal directed but impulsive—the reason why he intervned in the corruption case of the nine samurai. He knows just how to deal with the sinister Hanbei, and how to protect the cause of civic

virtue. It is in character that he disappears briskly after what he has taken on as his mission. Mastery is the dominant theme of the film.

Mystery It is in Sanjuro's character that he is mysterious. He enters the action abruptly, takes charge and promotes events, then vanishes rapidly without so much as identifying himself.

Corruption Corruption, it seems, is a universal theme, wherever human communities form. In the present film corruption has spread like a disease. Sanjuro is called in like a doctor, to lance the infection, and effectively dispels the disease before himself vanishing.

Weakness Weakness is a debilitation of natural strength. Whoever possesses the strength required for his life will eventually find it in decline. In the present drama the nine samurai with which we begin are inherently weak and without recourse.