

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Yojimbo (1961)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

To an American brought up on a diet of cowboy movies, and on some decisive years of living on a ranch in central Arizona, a movie like *Yojimbo* is likely to prove a shock. A Japanese film, which picks up the themes of a great American film like *High Noon* (1952; produced by Stanley Kramer, starring Gary Cooper), is bound not only to startle an aficionado of the American west, but to leave him awestruck at the producer's international sensitivities. In thinking to understand this close interrelation of two closely connected but culturally diverse films, it strikes this author that both *High Noon* and *Yojimbo* dig deeply into archetypes, universal patterns of character and action, indeed into universal values, which transcend time and place. *Yojimbo* and Marshall Kane are both figures who stride into classical crises of thought and action, the fierce revenge killer just freed from prison, *Yojimbo* the hornets nest of a village, in which rival gangs threaten to tear him apart. Marshall Kane faces the dilemma of whether or not to remain in town until 12 noon, when the fierce murderer, Miller, arrives in town, on the noon train, and makes clear his intention to destroy Marshall Kane.

Parallel situations, parallel heroic figures meeting those parallel stakes--parallel stakes--it is to Kurosawa's credit that throughout his broad span of films he intersects regularly and fruitfully with the classics of great film. What is being said here is that there is a finite number of great film themes, and that taking them on is already a major step toward the maturity of one's generic genius.

Auteur Kurosawa seems in this film to be challenging himself to step directly into the ethical arena; to take a position on the arbitrary but significant behavior of *Yojimbo*. (Many of Kurosawa's films --*Drunken Angel*, *Red Beard*, *The Hidden Fortress*, *Rashomon*, *Seven Samurai*--come to mind as essentially ethical dramas), *Yojimbo* is an existentialist-ethical film. Guy, completely dispensible for action, walks into a town which seems to be open but highly charged country fraught with what happens in and to it. What seems to be about to happen is picked up out of the air of conversation, and Sanjuro, the main character, makes his move into that situation. He talks into the situation in which he finds himself, He quickly realizes that the town is torn apart by the conflict, in it, between two rival gangs. This is, for Kurosawa, a typical entry point at which ethical choice is keenly there In front of one. Keen edged moments, obliging sudden choice, are the definers of the person in this world.

Film Critics were quick to have their say. It was no surprise that Kurosawa felt an affinity for the western. Themes dear to this director abounded in the already fast growing film literature of the American west. The theme of the spare lawman entering a territory that needs taming, is from the spiritual territory of *Rashomon* or *Seven Samurai*. The bleakness of nature settles down over the present film as it will over *The Hidden Fortress*. The radiance of the end of *Drunken Angel* rivals that of the conclusion of *High Noon*.

Historical Background Kurosawa, as we know, favors scenes from Japanese history. *Rashomon* and *Seven Samurai* present classic examples of this predilection. The Japanese historical perspective, in each of these films, presents itself as a distant and mythical mood. The mythical aspect doesn't mean a fairy tale atmosphere dominates these or each of these two films. In *Rashomon*, particularly, an overhanging irrealty makes as stark as possible the contrast with the hard reality of rape.

PLOT

At the end of the Edo period, in 1860, a wandering ronin passes through a dusty country village in what one would best describe as 'being at a loss for what to do, or at loose ends. (Historically speaking, this was the case; ronins were true samurai, who had lost their appointment to a samurai master, and who

were there on the loose, on the land.) The ronin in question stops at a farmhouse to ask for water. He overhears a conversation between an elderly couple who are lamenting that their son has gone off to join 'the gamblers.' Upon questioning them he learns that 'the gamblers' are one of a couple of rival gangs that have taken over the village, and are wreaking havoc among the citizens. (Historically speaking this kind of breakdown situation was characteristic of a society passing through the kind of disorder that prevailed at the end of Edo culture.)

Once in the town the ronin stops at a tavern, where the owner tells him he would be wise to leave town. He learns that two warring bosses--Seibei who controls the gambling trade and the owner of the town's productive sake business--are dangerously suspicious of any new face in town, and have thugs on all sides ready to kill for them. Yojimbo decides--surprisingly, that he will stay in town, infiltrate the two gangs, and eventually kill them off, the best way of clearing rot from the town. He keeps his identity mysterious, essentially giving himself the kind of identity Odysseus gave to himself when questioned by the Cyclops. The stage is set for the entrance of a genuine mystery man, a no name.

The no name begins by selling his services, as a body guard, to the sake seller, the weaker of the two rival sides. It is time now, though, to settle with a major rival. Behind No name's plan we need to add in the attack on Ushitora, the gambling boss. Behind that game plan lies the fact, which No name picks up from an overheard conversation, that one of the gangs intends to murder No name before he carries out his own raid. That way they will not have to pay Sanjuro, No Name, for his bodyguard services. The gang raid after all is forestalled by the arrival of a government official, which leads both sides to pull back their horns and retreat.

Meanwhile the gang war escalates. Both of the rival parties take violent revenge on one other, the sake brewery being trashed and the same fate handed out to the silk factory owned by Seibei's stronger rival. The small town is nearly wiped out. The ronin is imprisoned and tortured by Seibei's forces, and eventually escapes hidden in a coffin provided by Gonji, the tavern owner who from the beginning has served as a confidant to the ronin. From his hiding place, in a nearby monastery, the ronin learns of the terrible revenge brewing against Gonji. After a bloody battle the ronin dispatches a variety of the town's woes. The ronin departs, declaring that the worst of the town's troubles are over. Some semblance of order is restored.

CHARACTERS

<i>Sanjuro</i>	The ronin, swordsman and ex samurai.
<i>Gonji</i>	The tavern owner, who defends and befriends Sanjuro
<i>Unosuke</i> ,	A gun toting gangster.
<i>Seibei</i>	Original boss of the town's underworld. Operates out of a brothel.
<i>Ushitora</i>	A second gang leader in the town.
<i>Orin</i>	The wife of Seibei, and the brain behind his criminal organization.
<i>Inokichi</i>	Younger brother of Ushitora, A strong fighter but easily fooled.
<i>Tokuemon</i> .	A sake brewer, self-appointed as the town's new mayor.
<i>Yoichiro</i>	The gentle son of Seibei and Orin.
<i>Hansuke</i>	The town's completely corrupt constable.
<i>Watanabe</i>	The town's coffin maker, who is profiting greatly by the town's wars.
<i>Nui</i>	Kohei's wife
<i>Kohei</i>	<i>Nui's</i> husband of. He lost all of their money gambling.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Far the most powerful character in Yojimbo is Sanjuro. The entire tale develops around the decision of this figure to pause in the small non-descript village that catches his fancy as he passes across the dusty landscape. Makes no fine claims, allows himself to be dragged into a brutal countryside war. A mystery man, when it comes to identifying himself. Shows great willingness to kill abundantly for the troubles of a small village.

It is not that he doesn't know the territory, for once he gets inside the village he seems to know how to handle himself. Like a samurai he has one elegant feature--he will prove himself gifted at swordsmanship. With that swordsmanship he feels ample power to take on violence and chaos. Open as he is, Sanjuro finds one particular acquaintance, the tavern owner, and eventually savior, who opens up to him and explains what's going on in the town. If we have watched the film we know what is going on there, but we do not know what drives Sanjuro's interest in the violent place. He seems a man poised on the verge of action. In the position where, as Jean Paul Sartre would have had it, we all are perched. Life is essentially choice in action. Some choices are religious--the Christian choice to do good for others, the Buddhist choice to abstain from doing harm--but many are political while the vast majority are economic, involving personal costs and balances. Of which kind are those of Sanjuro? We are not given a precise answer in the present film, and yet the answer, thinking back to Sartre's view of choice, as well as to other figures in Kurosawa--Red Beard, the doctor in Drunken Angel, the disguised King in The Hidden Fortress--is that Kurosawa used Sanjuro as the power in independent will, man's most precious gift.

THEMES

Unshakable masculine will We refer again to a powerful trait which characterizes Sanjuro. From the presence of this will he draws extraordinary powers for social effect, some of it brutal, some salvational. Nietzsche's superman is a prototype for Sanjuro.

Choice Sanjuro appears at the opening of the script, looking up toward a dilapidated village. It is up to him whether he takes a turn into the village, to ask for water. Choice sets in at the moment before a decision is made. In the Middle Ages the Figure of Hercules at the Crossroads served as the emblem of this theme.

Violence Violence begets violence. That is certainly the case in the world into which Sanjuro steps. One killing begets another, as in a deeply revenge based society. It is Sanjuro's sense, and perhaps the wisdom in his own violence, that by wiping out the evil village before him he can wipe out the village's violence. It is primitive thinking and religious in nature, to establish violence, which is ritual in nature, as a central theme of healing.

Commercial corruption Corruption on the small town level is universal, but is rarely accompanied by so much monetary fury as in the present tale. The clashing forces are rival-- first of all business rivals-in sake and cloths--for as producers they knew their commodities are worth shedding blood for.

SCENES

Sanjuro comes to a fork on his dusty path. He is deciding, which path to take. One senses that his choice, to take the path into a small country village, is arbitrary.

Sanjuro stops at a farmhouse inside the village. An elderly couple explains to him that the town has been taken over by two rival gangs, and that their own son has run away to work with 'the gamblers' Yakusa or crime gang.

Sanjuro stops at a tavern, where the sympathetic owner befriends him in the complexities of the town's internal structure and struggles.

We learn how the town's sake brewery pronounced himself the new mayor and how this move affected the balance of power.

Sanjuro refuses to disclose his full identity, even his name, thus adding greatly to the mystery of his presence in the town.

A large battle arises between the two principal antagonists. It is broken only by the arrival of a government inspector, who imposes a temporary truce.

Sanjuro foments jealousy and hostility between the gangs and their individual members. Gun fire and ambush are daily occurrences.

The son of the Ushitora clan grows increasingly suspicious of Sanjuro's behind the scenes machinations. Sanjuro is captured, tortured, and heavily beaten.

With the help of a coffin, smuggled out of town by the tavern owner, Sanjuro escapes to recuperate in a small temple.

Sanjuro makes it back to town, kills essentially all of the rival factions, and disappears from the town, declaring the place thoroughly purged.