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'YOJIMBO'

Quiet in Town

By Jonathan Cott

Akira Kurosawa's "Yojimbo" is an astonishing film. In fact, it is the most beautifully wrought and shockingly extreme expression of violence that any contemporary work of art has presented to us.

In a time when personal violence is feared with a violence of its own and when a mass destruction—the kind of which even St. Juste or Sorel could hardly have conceived—is a possibility, we need a violent kind of art to purge us of this terrible discrepancy. It must force the violence out of the edges of our consciousness where we pretend that "niceness" and "placidity" are controlling our actions while in fact we wait comfortably and enviously for the external destruction we hide internally. "Yojimbo" gives us a violence as shocking as it is exhilarating, especially so as it is manifested in a jolting comic style.

For "Yojimbo" — set in a disintegrating 1860 Japan — is nothing if not the most exciting Western ever filmed. Yet it is a Western in the same way that "Shoot the Piano Player" is a gangster film or Kafka's "The Trial" and John Hawkes' "The Lime Twig" are mystery novels. In the TV Westerns, for example, the structure and conformation of the society continues to operate; only a few characters are killed off. Marshal Dillon and his crippled and frustrated friends reappear week after week. But in "Yojimbo," there is no deception, the violence is so real that almost the entire town and its population are destroyed and mutilated in the most terrifying ways. Arms are sliced off, men are torn apart by grinning killers, a dog carries a bleeding hand in his mouth, the screams of the dying make us shudder. And the jokes are centered around violence. We see the film's "protagonist," the Samurai Sanjuro played by Toshiro Mifune, seemingly cleave a man's back in two with his sword, and the victim thinks so too. But then Sanjuro tells him to "get up," and instead of his body breaking apart, the man realizes that he is still whole. This is a self-realization of a terrifyingly comic type, and it is a kind of humor that is as ghastly as it is direct.

Sanjuro kills six bodyguards who are guarding Nui, Kohel's wife, frees her, and helps her to escape with her husband and child. Humanism? Certainly not. And here we must focus up on the character of Sanjuro. He refuses women and tells Kohel he will kill him if he cries. What, then, motivates Sanjuro? He tells us himself at the beginning of the film: "It would be better if all these townspeople were dead." This is just what he means; there are no complications to this man.

These townspeople, divided into two groups — one supporting the gambler Seibei; the other, the gambler Ushi-Tora, both of whom want to control the "whole territory" — are pictured as grotesques, pusillanimous and anxious. The terrifying truth is that the ends of these people are violent and nightmarish just because what they all fantasize to themselves — a frightful violent destruction, the brutal pleasure of which they shirk away from — occurs as actuality. What Sanjuro does is to draw the violence out of them by creating situations that

have, ultimately, to explode in terror. He succeeds; the deaths increase as the film nears its end. Sanjuro is eventually beaten up, but escapes to wreak the final destruction. To a man who screams out "Mother!" before Sanjuro finally lets him escape, the latter says: "A long life eating mush is best." For those who pretend to act tough, death comes violently. Sanjuro doesn't deceive himself; he is a protagonist of violence. And the only other man similar to him is Nosuke, the pretty younger brother of Ushi-Tora, who shoots to kill with a love of the violence that eventually destroys him. "I'll be waiting for you at the entrance to hell," he tells Sanjuro as he dies. For these two have the same violent soul. Their perverse loves, suggested in terms of personal jealousy and rivalry, is the only love in "Yojimbo," and it too ends in terror.

Even the brilliantly comic Western music score accentuates the film's violence, for, unlike the atrocious score for "The Island" which mitigates that film's strong emotions, when we hear the Sanjuro theme, we smile at the knowledge that violence is about to break out. Kurosawa's perfect plot construction, his elliptical but savagely clear camera work, and his lack of artistic self-indulgence emphasize the fact that what Sanjuro does to the townspeople in drawing their violence out into the open is what Kurosawa with his film does to us.

"Now it will be quiet in this town," the cunning, indestructible Sanjuro says after the violence is done, and he leaves town. The catharsis has taken place, Sanjuro is, finally, violence personified, and we are reminded of Isaiah's: "At eventide behold terror; and before the morning they are not."