

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Yojimbo</b>
Author(s)	Marcia Gillespie Lloyd Gordon Ward
Source	<i>Toronto Film Society</i>
Date	1980 Mar 31
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	8
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Yojimbo, Kurosawa, Akira, 1961 Per un pugno di dollari (A fistful of dollars), Leone, Sergio, 1964

TORONTO FILM SOCIETY  
THIRTY-SECOND SEASON  
EIGHTH EXHIBITION MEETING  
MARCH 31, 1980, AT 7:30 P.M.  
IN THE TOWN HALL  
ST. LAWRENCE CENTRE FOR THE ARTS

Order of Programme

YOJIMBO (The Bodyguard) . . . . . 110 mins

Intermission

PER UN PUGNO DI DOLLARI . . . . . 100 mins  
(A Fistful of Dollars)

YOJIMBO (The Bodyguard) Japan 1961 110 mins b&w 16 mm sub-titled

Production Company: *Kurosawa Productions for Toho*. Producers: *Tomoyuki Tanaka and Ryuzo Kikushima*. Director: *Akira Kurosawa*. Screenplay: *Ryuzo Kikushima and Akira Kurosawa*. Photography: *Kazuo Miyagawa*. Music: *Masaru Sato*. Art Director: *Yoshiro Muraki*. Sound: *Hisashi Shimonaga and Choshichiro Mikami*. Lighting: *Choshiro Ishii*.

Cast: ["The Good Guys"] - Toshiro Mifune (*Sanjuro Kuwabatake, the bodyguard*), Eijiro Tono (*Gonji, the innkeeper*), Atsushi Watanabe (*the coffin maker*), Yoshio Tsuchiya (*Kohei, the farmer*), Yoko Tsukasa (*Nui, his wife*), Yosuke Natsuki (*their son*).

["The Bad Gury"] - Kamatari Fujiwara (*Tazaemon, the silk merchant*), Seizaburo Kawazu (*Seibei, Tazaemon's henchman*), Isuzu Yamada (*Orin, his wife*), Hiroshi Tachikawa (*Yoichiro, their son*), Susumu Fujita (*Honma, Tazaemon's ex-bodyguard*), Takashi Shimura (*Tokuemon, the sake merchant*), Kyu Sazanka (*Ushitora, Tokuemon's henchman*), Daisuke Kato (*Inokichi, his brother*), Tatsurya Nakadai (*his younger brother with a pistol*).

["Other minor players"] - Ikio Sawamura (*Hansuke, the constable*), Akira Nishimura (*Kuma*), Jerry Fujio (*Roku*).

In discussing *Shane* (shown by TFS Film Buff Series 1978-79), which is widely acknowledged as one of the most perfect examples of the American western, we discussed those aspects of the western formula which define the genre.

The defining characteristics of the western can probably be reduced to two criteria. The first of these is that the focus of action is essentially a lawless arena. In the case of the American western this is usually the last third of the nineteenth century, give or take a decade. The second criterion is that the focal character is for all practical purposes a wanderer characterized by a restrained martial expertise which, in the course of the action, is exercised in the service of "the good" but who remains an essentially rootless wanderer for an indefinite period before the beginning of the action or may acquire that status in the opening sequences. Also in the American western, the martial expertise is in the form of fisticuffs and the use of guns. The set of interests which constitute "the good" may be so culturally defined as to be obvious or so understated that it becomes discernible only in the light of the protagonist's allegiance.

The essentially solitary life of the protagonist though related to his status as a wanderer is usually reinforced by his martial adroitness. It is compatible with periods of male camaraderie but is seldom more than tangentially compatible with the world of women.

With these two criterial attributes in mind, the following outline of *Yojimbo* can readily be seen as a striking exemplification of the western genre.

In 1860 Japan had just begun its staggeringly swift transition from backward feudal isolation to the world power that was able to defeat Russia with a modern navy in 1905 . . . Many of the samurai, the professional warriors attached to feudal lords, found themselves unemployed and homeless. Such a samurai is the hero of *Yojimbo*.

A small town [Manome] is torn by a bloody feud between two gamblers, each of whom has a gang of killers financed by a merchant. Quite by chance, a samurai arrives in this town, with nothing to his name but his sword and his skill with it; and he decides to capitalize on the feud by hiring out to one or the other gambler as a *yojimbo* (bodyguard). He is entirely disinterested — he slices up a few thugs merely to prove his prowess and send up his price. At the beginning he seems only the most efficient killer of the lot. As the film progresses and the gambling factions plot and counterplot, the samurai seems more and more admirable . . . a man of courage and judgment who has absolutely no mercy for those with defective honor. (Kauffmann, 1966, pp. 379-380).

Clearly the focus of action is a lawless arena and the focal character is a wanderer characterized by a martial expertise which is exercised in the service of "the good". While in the American western martial expertise takes the form of fisticuffs and the use of guns, in *Yojimbo* martial expertise takes the form of remarkable skill and adroitness in the use of the sword. (If one is given, as a number of critics have been, to Freudian interpretations to guns in westerns as phallic symbols, the Japanese have produced a prodigiously superior phallic symbol with the sword.)

Two aspects of the American western which spring readily to mind but which in our analysis are not considered criterial, are horses and "cowboy clothes". The place of the horse in the American western has often been discussed as symbolic of freedom of movement and has typically been articulated with the hero's status as a wanderer. In spite of the fact that the hero in *Yojimbo* walks rather than rides a horse, he is clearly a wanderer. In the American western, the hero's use of "cowboy clothes" has usually served to visually distinguish him from the townspeople and particularly in its peacock aspect, from the villain. The western hero's "cowboy clothes" are somehow suggestive of utilitarianism while retaining a visual stylishness. The hero's costume in *Yojimbo* retains an apparent utilitarianism but has more of a suggestion of shabbiness than is common in the American western. Still, the hero's costume in *Yojimbo* does serve to distinguish him from the townspeople and gives him a visual appearance more closely related to the villain.

In the American western there is only a limited number of categories of characters; these are the townspeople and the out-of-towners, both of whom can be subdivided into the good guys and the bad guys. The good townspeople usually have the least to do with advancing the story although their presence seems to be thematically essential; they represent the potential for civilization. The bad

townspeople typically serve to set the story in motion; they represent the organization of evil for self advancement. In the American western they have frequently been bankers, monopolistic merchants or cattle barons. In *Yojimbo* they are monopolistic merchants. The bad townspeople possess no personal attributes that give them any strategic advantage over the good townspeople, but they hire the bad out-of-towners who are the most active villains and who frequently take the form of a gang. The good out-of-towners are most typically the solitary hero, though in some westerns he is accompanied by one or more male companions. Although the hero sides with the interests of the good townspeople he is rarely actually employed by them. In Warshaw's analysis of the western he remarks on the fact that the western hero is typically unemployed or appears to be unemployed even if he is a sheriff or marshall. The hero of *Yojimbo* is clearly unemployed when he wanders into town but even more striking is the fact that even though he goes through a series of complicated gestures, presumably to gain employment as a *yojimbo*, i.e., a bodyguard, he just as clearly remains unemployed in his own mind because in siding with the good he must act against his would-be employers, from whom he exacts increasing sums of money.

In choosing to structure his film in terms of the formula of the western genre, Kurosawa achieved a complexity and a freshness that was novel within the Japanese genre of the swordsman called *chambara*. He retained the conventionalized images of the *chambara* throughout his film and most strikingly in the highly stylized sword fights but he restored to them a freshness of vision and an almost exuberant dynamic that upon its release rapidly made *Yojimbo* one of the most popular of Kurosawa's films in Japan.

Kurosawa is one of the relatively small number of directors whose brilliance has come to be internationally recognized. Kurosawa's brilliance has prompted many diverse critics to consider the accolade of "genius" probably more than any other Japanese director. Kurosawa is to be credited with having found a broadly based North American audience. At least among students of Japanese films, *Yojimbo* is considered to be one of Kurosawa's masterworks. Unfortunately it never found as wide a North American audience as some of his other films and among Kurosawa's films available in North America it remains among the ones least shown. Kurosawa has often been described as being among the most western of Japanese directors and as somehow being "less Japanese". Yet the relative obscurity of *Yojimbo* in North America seems to reflect an opinion that in some way *Yojimbo* is seen as almost too characteristically Japanese and presumptively less accessible to North American audiences. Nevertheless, as shown above, *Yojimbo* is distinguished by its use of formula ideas which have been primarily developed in the United States.

As a further complication, the plot, as distinct from the genre formula, derives from Dasheil Hammet's novel *Red Harvest* which is a book that would have been ideal material for *film noir* but which Kurosawa reworked as *Yojimbo* to be an almost perfect exemplification of the western genre.

One of the observations that Stanley Kauffman made about *Yojimbo* in 1963 warrants recalling. "Donald Richie, who is expert in Japanese films, wrote recently that *Yojimbo* is a 'hilarious lampoon of empty heroics.' To a nonexpert, the hilarity is not apparent. Some of the samurai's killings are done so quickly and against such odds that they produce a giggle, but the giggle rises less from incredibility than credibility, a conviction of the reality of this man and his outsize qualities, a kind of inverted wide-eyed wonder" (Kauffmann, 1966, p. 381). *Yojimbo* was the first time that Kurosawa went out of his way to create an intricate patchwork of black comedy. Kurosawa was making fun of the *chambara* genre but this is often missed by North Americans who are unfamiliar with the genre. *Yojimbo* is replete with the conventions of that kind of period film but Kurosawa

infused this common material with new life, returning to even the most notorious clichés their original value. Clichés, film or otherwise, are clichés only because they happen to be true, and in *Yojimbo* Kurosawa's validating of material which the common Japanese cinema had deprived of all life was particularly striking. To take but one example: one of the staple clichés of the period film is a falling fighter's crying *oka* (from *okaasan*, meaning mother) as he dies. Nowadays it is used in a most perfunctory manner, and Kurosawa, seeing it as a challenge, deliberately revitalized it. First in a short scene with a mother and her small son, where it was used with all of the human emotion it retains in ordinary Japanese speech; next in a very funny scene where a weak young man, released by the rival gang, rushes to his mother, and barely gets it out of his mouth before she viciously slaps him; and finally in a fighting scene where a dying gang member gives back to it all the horror and despair and longing for life which rightfully belongs to it (Richie, 1971, p. 236).

PER UN PUGNO DI DOLLARI (A Fistful of Dollars) Italy/Germany/Spain 1964

100 mins colour 35 mm dubbed

Distributor: *United Artists*. Production Company: *Jolly (Rome)/Constantin (Munich/Ocean (Madrid)*. Producer: *Arrigo Colombo, alias Harry Colombo, and Giorgio Papi, alias George Papi*. Production Manager: *Franco Palaggi and Gunter Raguse*. Director: *Sergio Leone, alias Bob Robertson*. Screenplay: *On original release, no screenplay credit was given, yet adapted from Yojimbo (1961) written by Ryuzo Kikushima and Akira Kurosawa (later screenplay credit was given as Sergio Leone and Luccio Tessari from story by Toni Palombi)*. Photography: *Massimo Dallamano, alias Jack Dalmas*. Music: *Ennio Morricone, alias Dan Savio*. Art Director: *Carl Simi, alias Charles Simons*. Editor: *Roberto Cinquini, alias Bob Quintle*. Title Animation: *Luigi Lardani*. Set Decorator: *Elio Pacella and Edy Simson*.

Cast: ["The Good Guys"] - *Clint Eastwood (Joe, the stranger), Pepe Calvo (Silvanio, the town tavern keeper), Josef Egger (Piripero, the coffin maker), Marianne Koch (Marisol, the wife detained as a mistress), Daniel Martin (Julian, her husband), child-uncredited (Jesus, their son)*.

["The Bad Guys"] - *Wolfgang Lukschy (John Baxter, the gun merchant), Margherita Lozano (Consuela Baxter, his wife), Bruno Carotenuto, alias Carlo Brown (Antonio Baxter, their son), Antonio Prieto (Benito Rojo, the liquor merchant), Sieghardt Rupp (Esteban Rojo, brother), Gian Maria Volonte, alias John Welles (Ramon Rojo, brother and rifleman), Richard Stuyvesant (Chico, the Rojo's henchman)*.

["Other minor players"] - *Benito Stefanelli, alias Benny Reeves (Rubio)*.

*Yojimbo* was a major film by an internationally renowned director with a star cast headed by a remarkable actor of star calibre. Although it was very favourably received in Japan, in North America it attracted reviews that ranged from mixed to

positive and played to small art house audiences. *A Fistful of Dollars* was a "B" film by an obscure minor director with an unimpressive cast headed by a lesser television personality which was very positively received in Italy, widely reviewed upon its North American release and played to large audiences. In fact, by the end of 1979, *A Fistful of Dollars* had earned \$4.2 million in North American rentals while *Yojimbo* is not even listed in *Variety's* "All Time Film Rental Champs".

Just as *Yojimbo* had significantly contributed to the expansion and revivification of *chambara* films, *A Fistful of Dollars* did much to shape and characterize the spaghetti western internationally. On its initial release *A Fistful of Dollars* had no writing credits and the director was listed as Bob Robertson. Although *Variety* continues to list *A Fistful of Dollars* as having been directed by "B. Robertson", by the time of its North American release, Sergio Leone had dropped his pseudonym and had grandly stepped forward as an internationally significant new director having already completed the sequel, *For A Few Dollars More* (1965).

A number of the contemporary reviews of *A Fistful of Dollars* remarked on the almost casual use of firearms, and the somewhat stylized but pervasive violence. At the same time, most critics remarked favorably upon Leone's skilful use of color cinematography and montage. The calibre of the post production dubbing that characterized the film was obtrusive.

The most accurate plot synopsis was published by the

A man rides into San Miguel, a Mexican bordertown run by two rival gangs, the Rojos being rather stronger than the Baxters. Demonstrating his prowess by killing four Baxter men, he is hired by the Rojos as a gunslinger. Ramon Rojo [massacres] two U.S. and Mexican army troops in order to steal the gold they are exchanging for guns; and knowing that the Baxters will make trouble if they can prove what happened, the Rojos propose a truce. But the stranger cunningly convinces both gangs (at considerable financial profit to himself) that there are two survivors from the massacre, with the result that they clash in a bloody battle from which both sides emerge decimated. He also helps a woman, Marisol, to escape with her husband and child: she has been kept as his mistress by Ramon Rojo on the pretext that her husband, Julian, cheated him at cards. Their eyes finally opened, the Rojos beat him up brutally, set fire to the Baxter house, and shoot down the surviving members of the gang. Having recovered from his beating up, the stranger returns, faces the last five Rojos, and kills them all, including the sharp-shooting Ramon. He then moves on.

In spite of the fact that the North American release of *A Fistful of Dollars* had been held up for two years due to a lawsuit launched by the Japanese Company that made *Yojimbo* and which was eventually settled out of court, very few contemporary reviewers mentioned the apparent relatedness of the two films. *A Fistful of Dollars* is clearly a genre western as a re-reading of the preceding discussion of that genre on the first page of these notes would illustrate. The stature of *A Fistful of Dollars* among westerns is reflected in the fact that Cawelti in his treatise *The Six-Gun Mystique* includes it in his chronological list of major and representative westerns. The small ways that *Yojimbo* has wrought creative variations of the formula within the genre have remarkable counterparts in *A Fistful of Dollars*. In the American western the hero typically enters on horseback. In *Yojimbo* the hero strides into town, in *A Fistful of Dollars* the hero enters on a mule. In both films, the absence of the horse suggests some prior loss of status by the hero which is never discussed. In the American western, the hero's clothing manages to suggest a more utilitarian function than it actually has and to do so without distracting from its manifest stylishness. The hero's clothing in neither

*Yojimbo* nor *A Fistful of Dollars* has the visual appearance of the typical western hero. In both films the hero's clothing visually distinguishes them from the townspeople and in both films their clothing differs from those of the more typical western hero in their noticeable threadbare quality.

*A Fistful of Dollars* and its two sequels *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), have been referred to as the "Man With No Name" trilogy primarily because Clint Eastwood played the same role wearing the same costume, and because little reference is made to the hero's name. He is actually referred to as Joe several times in *A Fistful of Dollars* and is finally given that name in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Interestingly enough, this notion of the hero having no name remarkably parallels an aspect of *Yojimbo* usually not observed by non-Japanese speaking audiences. When the hero is asked his name in *Yojimbo*, "he looks out of the window, sees the mulberry field, and says, 'Kuwabatake' (mulberry field), that his first name is Sanjuro (thirty years old), adding, 'Going on forty, though.'" (Richie, 1970, p. 159). Understandably, the subtitles do not make it clear that the hero is declining to give his name.

The presentation of *A Fistful of Dollars* following *Yojimbo* will afford an excellent opportunity to assess the full range of cinematic similarities and differences that characterize the two films, e.g., the use of special lens, the use of music, the pictorial compositions uniquely suited to the proportions of the widescreen, etc. To clear the ground for this exploration, a further listing of some of the remarkable parallels within the plots of the two films may be useful. A central sequence in both films involves the exchange of hostages. This scene in the two films differ primarily in that the hostages approach each other on foot in *Yojimbo* and on horseback in *A Fistful of Dollars*. The event of the mother slapping her returning son occurs in both films. In both films the home and place of business of one of the competing families is deliberately burned by the members of the other family. In both films, the event that leads to the beating of the hero is his liberation of the woman who is being detained as a mistress and whom he reunites with her husband and son and to whom he gives the money he has accumulated so that they can leave town. After the hero is beaten unconscious, part of his escape is affected under a veranda. He is secreted out of town in a coffin to a hideout where he slowly regains his strength. The innkeeper who has helped him is apprehended by the remaining gang while taking food out of town to him. This prompts his return to town and the final fight.

In the career of Sergio Leone, *A Fistful of Dollars* represented both a marked departure and the masterwork that elevated him from obscurity. His prior films, namely, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959) and *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1960), were both relatively low budget historical spectacles. In both their use of color cinematography and montage, they are unremarkable, even pedestrian. The films which Leone made after *A Fistful of Dollars* continue to exemplify the same kind of camera work and editing for which he was critically praised in *A Fistful of Dollars*. His involvement with, almost his obsession with, the spaghetti western became more accentuated with the films that followed *A Fistful of Dollars*. He became increasingly interested in the historical accuracy of the social and political details within which his plots are embedded. The plots themselves however, as they gradually departed from the basic structure of *A Fistful of Dollars*, became increasingly diffuse, drawn out and boring. By the time one gets to Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), he has reached a point in his development where the film contains more social and political detail than most American westerns but at the same time they have become almost totally devoid of cinematic or thematic interest. The most interesting aspect of *Once Upon a Time in the West* is its musical score. For all of these reasons, careful consideration of *A Fistful of Dollars* is essential if one is to consider the significance of Sergio Leone as a film maker.

ADDENDUM: OUT OF COURT

Why the two-year delay in showing the movie for North American audiences? Part of it anyway was caused by a legal hangup with Japan, which objected to Leone and Co. making a movie cribbed, they alleged, from Yojimbo, directed by Akira Kurosawa.

Advance publicity for Fistful has no writing credits at all. Eastwood acknowledged yesterday that the story line was taken from Yojimbo, but that Yojimbo in turn wasn't particularly original in its "western" theme, so he didn't really know what the fuss had been about. (The Telegram, Dec 21, 1966, p. 43)

A Fistful of Dollars is a faithful adaptation of Akira Kurosawa's Yojimbo has until recently held up the American release of A Fistful of Dollars. (In an interview with Clive Denton, Clint Eastwood explained that Leone has never denied that his film was based on Yojimbo and that the lawsuit had arisen over a misunderstanding about royalty payments.) (Take One, Feb, 1967, p. 23)

Leone's company had neglected to buy the American rights to Yojimbo, and it took several years before a compromise settlement could be worked out with the Japanese company. (Focus on Film, Spring, 1972, p. 16)

Clint Eastwood interviewed by Patrick McGilligan years later:

That's the character's real strength -- you just wait for him to do or say something, anything.

You are mystified by him. It was played approximately the same way in Yojimbo, which it was stolen from or taken from.

Were you conscious of that at the time?

There was never any doubt. When we got over there, they told me it was a re-make of Yojimbo. I said fine. When I first saw Yojimbo, I thought, geez, this would make a great western, only nobody would ever have the nerve to make it with this style. And then when the script came through several years later, I thought this might be an interesting project. A European might not be afraid of it -- like Leone -- where an American would be afraid of approaching a western such as Fistful of Dollars with that kind of style. (Focus on Film, Summer - Autumn, 1976, p. 14)

References: Clint Eastwood by Stuart Kaminsky, 1974; Films and Filming, August, 1970; The Films of Akira Kurosawa by Donald Richie, 1970; Focus on Film, Spring, 1972; Focus on Film, Summer - Autumn, 1976; I Lost It at the Movies by Pauline Kael, 1965; Japanese Cinema by Donald Richie, 1971; Monthly Film Bulletin, June, 1967; New York Times, October 16, 1962; The Samurai Film by Alain Silver, 1977; Screen Series Japan by Arne Svensson, 1971; The Six-Gun Mystique by John G. Cavelti (no publication date given); Take One, February, 1967;

The Telegram, December 21, 1966; Variety, clipping, dateline:  
Rome, Nov 10; Variety, January 9, 1979; A World on Film by Stanley  
Kauffmann, 1966.

Research by Helen Arthurs

Notes written by  
Marcia Gillespie and Lloyd Gordon War.

Evaluations by Members of Previous Four Programmes

	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Very Good</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Total Ballots</u>	<u>Weighted Rating</u>
<u>November 19, 1979</u>							
Ballad of a Soldier	68	71	42	18	10	209	71.6
	* 32.5	34.0	20.1	8.6	4.8		
Raven's End	42	52	47	36	16	193	58.8
	* 21.8	26.9	24.4	18.6	8.3		
<u>December 10, 1979</u>							
The Golden Coach	82	62	37	21	10	212	71.8
	* 38.6	29.3	17.4	10.0	4.7		
Shakespeare Wallah	38	52	40	27	29	186	55.8
	* 20.4	28.0	21.5	14.5	15.6		
<u>January 28, 1980</u>							
Sansho, the Bailiff	73	71	29	7	9	189	80.6
	* 38.6	37.6	15.3	3.7	4.8		
Sunday Too Far Away	49	41	36	16	5	147	69.2
	* 33.3	27.9	24.5	10.9	3.4		
<u>February 18, 1980</u>							
Marius	52	44	12	6	1	115	80.4
	* 45.2	38.2	10.4	5.2	1.0		
Fanny	40	37	13	9	1	100	76.5
	* 40.0	37.0	13.0	9.0	1.0		