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Yojimbo: Kurosawa expresses the hopelessness of all the intellectuals of Japan who have watched their country pass into its modern technological stage guided by nothing but the pursuit of profit.

calls an enemy who has eluded him. It is the dog-eat-dog world soon to be imposed upon Japan by these vicious and amoral, albeit endlessly energetic and exasperatingly inventive, merchants.

Ushi-Tora has had a government inspector killed so that his successor would leave the town quickly out of fear, without examining Ushi-Tora's lack of legal adherence to the Tokugawa rules of trade. Murder is the means of these merchants, economic control their end. Guided only by an ethic of relentless cutthroat competition in which any perfidy is permissible if it leads to success, they believe the world will be theirs. The coffin maker cares only about the rate at which he uses his materials, as he, too, profits from the internecine warfare between the two merchant groups struggling for the silk monopoly. Kurosawa passes judgment on the morality of them all; the coffin maker becomes distressed only when the fighting becomes so extensive—with bodies multiplying geometrically—that the rival merchants, as with rival merchant nations at war, no longer bother with coffins.

Yojimbo reflects the upheaval experienced by all strata of the society at the moment when Japan passed from a feudal to a capitalist social order. In the first sequence, a peasant's son leaves home to seek adventure and money in the town. "Who wants a long life eating mush?" he asks. The temptation to join the fray is very great indeed. "Everybody's after easy money," laments the boy's father, speaking for Kurosawa. Later, caught in the life-and-death competitive struggle between the two warring

factions of merchants, this peasant boy screams for his mother. The *ronin* spares his life. He is, after all, only an innocent who has been seduced by the promise of luxury offered in the Japan of 1860 solely to the merchants. The film allows him to survive because he is not of the merchant class. "A long life eating mush is best," Mifune tells him. He runs home, his adventure a presage of the future when Japanese farmers would (as they had begun to by 1700) abandon the countryside in droves to seek survival in the swelling cities.

The *yojimbo* feels no qualms in choosing to fight for one faction or another, as both sides represent the same aspirations, morality, and cause. With the loss of his own feudal master, he has been deprived as well of his personal identity and must improvise a name. He chooses "Kuwabatake Sanjuro" (Mulberry Field) on the basis of the local terrain, for all is now ludicrous and without moral sense. Neither feudal honor nor rational purpose remains. "Better if all these men were dead," Kuwabatake Sanjuro declares.

The *ronin's* contempt for the traders is both absurd and justified, for the feudal world of samurai, if fixed in its values, was no less harsh. Kurosawa is also well aware of the nihilism and futility of such an "answer." It is the merchants who are in ascendance. They cannot be wiped out; it is too late. The *ronin* is a member of a dying class whose nobility is anachronistic because he cannot save Japan. He can save one woman, who has been kidnapped and made the concubine of one of the merchant traders, but he cannot save the society from its inevitable fate. He can kill every one in the town by the end of the movie (he leaves alive only the innkeeper who has been kind to him, the coffin maker, and one madman). But we know that the massacre is a wish-fulfilling fantasy and that with the Meiji Restoration only eight years off, merchants will re-emerge from behind every post and doorway.

"Now it will be quiet in this town," says the *ronin*, but the calm is no more permanent than his own survival. With the skill of centuries of warrior power expressed in his person, none of the upstart merchants could compete with his sword. But Ushi-Tora's younger brother, Nosuke (Tatsuya Nakadai), has bought a gun on his travels. The Dutch after all, have had their outpost near Nagasaki. Commodore Perry has come and gone. The gun is a symbol of the passing of the warrior culture, of Kuwabatake Sanjuro's incipient obsolescence. Cut down by the *ronin's* sword, Nosuke asks to die with his gun in his hand. The samurai proffers it to him, accepting Nosuke's word that the weapon is now empty (which it is not). Because the film is a fantasy, a wish-fulfillment of the defeat of technology-ridden, pollution-drenched Japan, Nosuke dies before he can fire the final shot and kill the *ronin*.

Yojimbo is one of Kurosawa's darkest films. It does not, as some of Kurosawa's most voracious Japanese critics contend, substitute the "superman samurai" for a solution of the problems of contemporary Japan. Kurosawa, rather, expresses the hopelessness of all the intellectuals

of Japan who have watched their country pass into its modern technological stage guided by nothing but the pursuit of profit, even as feudal relationships persist. And it is the descendants of the merchants of *Yojimbo*, now directors of multinational corporations, who have so ravaged the countryside that, as in the case of the town after the *ronin* departs, little of value remains.

overlays that of the peasants at their rice planting which had been so sure, loud, and self-confident. Kurosawa leaves us with his sense that these samurai are magnificent men, full of grace and dignity. They recapitulate the positive content of a dying world. There is a profound sadness at the end of *Seven Samurai* because such as they have outlived their time. The peasants are the survivors, the carriers of a continuity that renews history, but something noble has been lost. Centuries will pass and it will not recur. It is as if the spirit of Japan, like a candle in the dark, had suddenly gone out. For Kurosawa, the Japan that follows has never since regained that beauty. It is perhaps a thing to be recovered in a future world increasingly remote and difficult to envisage. Kurosawa's films will never again be as lyrical as *Seven Samurai*. Nor does he ever again allow himself to feel so much for anything. The satiric works that follow seem, by comparison, like those of a person who has been hurt too deeply to allow himself to love again.

Kurosawa's remaining *jidai-geki*, *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jo*, 1957), *The Hidden Fortress* (*Kakushi Toride no San-Akunin*, 1958), *Yojimbo*, and *Sanjuro*, portray landscapes without faith. The underlying premise of all is that there is nothing left in which to believe. Remedy has eluded us. That we know the causes of suffering does not lead us out of the cycle of greed and brutality. The hope of the early postwar years, when it seemed that Japan might renew itself, led only to the moral darkness of resurgent neo-feudal power. Only *Red Beard*, with its willed message that good begets good, finds Kurosawa straining for some positive values in which we can all still believe. He can offer only a variation on the parable of the good Samaritan. But, by contrast with the hard brilliance of *Yojimbo*, *Red Beard* seems amorphous, even intellectually lazy, in its approach, as in Kurosawa's insistence through his main character that the insane murderess was born evil! Like Kurosawa in this film, the character Red Beard hangs on willfully to illusion, the only means he can discover of avoiding the nihilistic despair characteristic of *Yojimbo* or *Sanjuro*.