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At the Movies

IT WOULDN'T WORK without Toshiro Mifune. In this role he remains perfectly Japanese but also manages to look like a mixture of Clark Gable and Gary Cooper – the sly, amused Gable of screwball comedy and the weathered Cooper of the Western. And then he looks a little like, actually prefigures, someone else, whom I'll get to in a minute.

Mifune sometimes ambles, sometimes strides, scratches himself, shrugs one shoulder. There are lots of shots of him from the back. He seems tired without seeming done in; vaguely disreputable without being seedy. Is he dangerous? He is certainly crafty, but does he make his living by his craftiness or by his sword? He is that recurring figure in Japanese movies, the dismissed, masterless samurai. The time is 1860, pretty late for samurai in general, and the film is Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961).

The Criterion Collection issued a DVD version of this film in 1999, along with its sequel *Sanjuro: yojimbo* means 'bodyguard', and Sanjuro is the Mifune character's name. Doesn't seem long ago, and the prints looked fine to me – until I saw the new versions, released last month in brilliant high definition, and with a screen shaped the way Kurosawa had in mind for the cinema: that is, not cropped to split in half any characters who found themselves too close to the edge of the screen or reduce the size of rooms or windy streets. Now the old versions look like movies seen through fog.

But the real reasons for returning to the film are not technical. They have to do with the delicate balances Kurosawa achieves between East and West, light and dark, spoof and suspense, and the way he asks us to think again about genre. When Sergio Leone remade the film as *For a Fistful of Dollars* in 1964 – yes, Mifune's calculating squint and long silences show up again in Clint Eastwood – he caught the stylised violence of his model, and returned a distinct formality, an element of ancient ritual, to the Western. But he did only half what Kurosawa is doing, because *Yojimbo* already is a

Western, although it doesn't need to leave Japan or the modes of Japanese film to become one. 'Gunslingers are not samurai,' Kurosawa said much later. Indeed not, but gunslingers and samurai, in the movies at least, can be seen to inhabit a very similar, denuded universe of delayed violence and dreams of justice.

The crossovers were already familiar in 1961. Western critics thought Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) had borrowed a lot, maybe too much, from films like *High Noon* (1952), and the film was of course remade as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). What Kurosawa saw sooner than anyone else was that the mixture had stabilised into cliché, and Japanese studios, Stuart Galbraith tells us in *The Emperor and the Wolf* (2003), his book on Kurosawa and Mifune, were turning out samurai movies as fast as they could go. Time for parody; but not only for parody.

The film is full of music, for instance, a loud, witty soundtrack by Masaru Sato, who said his main influence was Henry Mancini. It doesn't sound like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, though, or *Days of Wine and Roses*. The blaring Latin sound of *Touch of Evil* comes closer, but actually you wouldn't think of Mancini if you hadn't been told. Sato's effect has lots of drums, mixes traditional Japanese flutes and other instruments with American big band noises, and feels jaunty and jangling throughout, discreetly off, as if half the band was playing in the wrong key. It's distracting at first, then you realise it's not decoration, it's commentary. It's a companion to Sanjuro, the sound of his mind, discordant and undefeated and unserious, even when he's grubby and silent and apparently solemn.

Sanjuro arrives in what we might call a one-horse town, if it were not, as it happens, a one-dog town. The creature trots towards him on the empty street, with something in its mouth. A bone, or some other piece of appetising rubbish? No, a severed human hand. It's a plastic-looking object, though, straight from the props department. Kurosawa wants just a flicker of film horror, not Gothic realism. But then where is the rest of this hand's body, and what violence is lurking in this place? The

town has been taken over by two gangs, one led by the local silk merchant, the other by the local sake merchant. The constable, obviously a version of the corrupt and cowardly sheriff of so many Westerns but here rather more like a combination of chorus and Shakespearean fool, tells Sanjuro he needs to sell himself to one side or the other, and makes a recommendation. He gets a commission too, of course. Sanjuro explores the possibility, but when he learns his employer is planning to kill him as soon as the final battle against the enemy is over, sets out on a complicated game of playing everyone against everyone else. The gangs are full of magnificent thugs, including a man who must be eight feet tall, a movie star (Tatsuya Nakadai) who looks like a Japanese Tony Curtis and a marvellously sinister woman, played by Isuzu Yamada, who recalls the Lady Macbeth figure from Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*. At one point the keeper of the town's sake shop, where Sanjuro spends much of his time, asks him if he has scripted the whole drama that is now unfolding between the two gangs. Sanjuro says, with scrupulous correctness: 'Half of it.'

This is a town where only the undertaker is doing good business and we hear him hammering at his coffins in construction throughout most of the movie. Then he stops. The fighting has escalated, although what we see, on the newly widened screen, is only the litter of bodies on the empty street. The undertaker appears, disconsolate, and the sake shop owner asks him why he isn't doing better than ever. The undertaker says when things get this bad no one bothers with coffins. There is dark, Brechtian humour of this kind everywhere in the film, although Kurosawa manages to keep his touch light even amid the carefully photographed results of butchery. Sanjuro is captured by one of the gangs because, now a sort of surly Robin Hood, he has liberated a kidnapped woman, the boss's mistress, and returned her to her abject husband and pleading child. He had to slice up six gangster guards to do this, so his craftiness, it turns out, is certainly backed up by swordsmanship, and the movie, for all its gestures of par-

ody, doesn't flinch from actual violence. When he escapes, thoroughly beaten up, bloody, one eye closed, he makes his way to the sake shop. The owner slides open the door and stares at Sanjuro for what feels like more than a minute. Is he ever going to move? The battered Sanjuro says: 'Could you let me in and do your amazement after that?'

This is not only a one-dog town, it is a one-gun town: the Tony Curtis lookalike has a pistol which he whisks out of his kimono whenever he wants to look especially stylish. How can there be a pistol in a samurai movie? How can there be a shoot-out when the weapons are chiefly swords? And most crucial of all, how can there be a shoot-out when there is only one gun in town? I'm not going to reveal Kurosawa's elegant solution to this problem, and shall say only that the balletic advance towards a showdown on the town's main street, a cluster of gangsters on one side, Sanjuro on the other, is both abstract and intense, in the way duels ought to be but usually aren't. This is where we wonder, as everything falls into place, as our implausible good guy sorts out the world and leaves town, how many genres are at work here and why there is no conflict among them. Comedy, satire, folk tale, action movie, Western, samurai film, and something like a musical without songs. As everyone says, this work is not as deep as *Rashomon* or as immediately memorable as *Seven Samurai*. But it is funnier than any Western from either side of the world, and its only competition, in a bleaker mode, would be Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976). At one point in that film Eastwood, as Wales, is invited to draw his gun and fight because there is a price on his head. The man who wants to kill him says it's nothing personal, he is just trying to make a living. After a very long pause Eastwood drawls, 'Dyin' ain't much of a livin', boy,' and then kills him. The joke doesn't undo the violence, and the violence doesn't impair the joke. It's the story and style of *Yojimbo*.

Michael Wood