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## AKIRA KUROSAWA'S HEROES: REBELS, SAINTS AND KILLERS ON THE SOCIAL FRONT LINE

BY ROBERT LEVINE '00

Akira Kurosawa is Japan's foremost filmmaker. With his kinetic mastery of the camera, his flawless, exact cutting, and his unpretentious predilection toward the rousing codes and devices of the West, it is only appropriate that Kurosawa, in winning first prize at the 1951 Venice Film Festival for *Rashomon*, was the first to breach the isolationist levee surrounding Japanese cinema and join the ranks of the world's finest film artisans. He is "one of the few artists to achieve international communication while at the same time remaining true to his own highly distinctive and insular national culture" (Mellen 42). Besides acting as the global cinematic ambassador for the Land of the Rising Sun, Kurosawa, in the twenty-eight films that constitute his career, has cultivated an impressive, unmistakable signature style that has consistently challenged and enhanced the established norms of his native cinema and society.

One of the most discernible recurring constituents of Kurosawa's groundbreaking artistic legacy is his penchant for a certain type of protagonist-- a development of and adherence to a specific mold of hero. Kurosawa often described himself as "the last of the samurai," and he consistently informs and instills his heroes with the principles of the samurai warrior, placing particular emphasis on courage, intensity, fortitude, and fealty (Prince 118). Kurosawa heroes are men of honor distinguished by a physical and/or spiritual strength. In addition to this "emphasis on individual willpower and physical might," Kurosawa adds "an abiding commitment to securing the basic needs of other human beings" (Prince 118). However, the Kurosawa heroes are never complete; they are still unformed and developing as human beings. They are always "beset by a series of moral, and often physical traumas, and the narratives study the progress of the protagonists toward enlightenment" (Prince 48).

In reference to the aforementioned catalogue of qualities, it seems that the virtues of courage, strength, determination, and concern for general

welfare are necessary attributes for *any* fictional embodiment of gallantry, comic book super-hero, medieval knight or otherwise. Should this be the extent of their assets, few characteristics would exist that could be considered truly unique to the director's brand of hero. It is with the addition of one more regular stylistic ingredient that Kurosawa is able to fashion his hero into a truly distinct and viable entity: the filmmaker consciously places his protagonists into a diegetic context of social and historical dynamism.

Each lead character who lives, struggles, and succeeds under the omnipotent arm of the Creator Kurosawa finds himself doing so during a time of sweeping historical change and jarring social upheaval. The Kurosawa hero is a vehicle for involved perspective; he is both a witness to and a product of the times in which he lives. The director shapes his protagonists as ambassadors between two distinct periods of time and existence, each of which is characterized by definite moral, ethical, and spiritual norms that, more often than not, lie in direct conflict with each other. The historical disharmony in the film can be a direct representation of the times in which it was made or an allegorical narrative using a period during the past as a model for the current state of the world. Either way, in a Kurosawa film, the past and the present do not gently coalesce, and the hero is challenged to maneuver through this rocky terrain without relinquishing the wholesome, decent ideals he knows to be right. By directly entwining the quest of the heroes with the plight of the times, Kurosawa employs his protagonists "as explicit role models for the audience" (Prince 40). Through them, Kurosawa prescribes his own social and spiritual agenda for dealing with the transitions of history.

By examining four significant entries in Kurosawa's filmography, one can trace the line of the filmmaker's quintessential heroic figure. Each of these films and their respective primary protagonists constitute an important developmental stage in the

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twenty year evolution of the Kurosawa hero, from his birth, to his consummation, to his eventual satirical subversion. These are *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), *Stray Dog* (1949), *Ikiru* (1952), and *Yojimbo* (1961).

*Sanshiro Sugata* is considered Kurosawa's first film. He had been supervising the creation of feature films for several years beforehand, but it was not until 1943 that he was given the official title of director. *Sanshiro Sugata* is the story of the title character, a brash, overly anxious martial arts student who is edified in a new fighting technique and through it matures into a noble, out-going human being. Kurosawa had chosen to "begin his career with a film about the junction of the old Japan and the new," with the cultural changes represented by the conflicts between two diametrically opposed forms of martial arts (Desser 63). The revolutionary new technique, *judo*, is based upon defense, and contrasts drastically with the currently prevalent and more strategically offensive *jujitsu*.

Immediately in the film, Kurosawa introduces his heroic convention of an individualist protagonist set in a time of transition. However, Kurosawa made *Sanshiro Sugata* under the auspices of the Japanese militarist government of that time, and was required to meet a certain propaganda requirement, which most likely deterred him from the unsettling social commentary that would characterize his later works (Desser 62). Politically and socially tinged narratives were not allowed due to the wartime environment. Many of Kurosawa's scripts had already been rejected for production, and he was only allowed to direct *Sanshiro Sugata* because of the safe period quality of the novel on which it was based (Richie 14). Alas, *Sanshiro Sugata* would have to serve less as a work of social critique and more as an introduction for Kurosawa's exceptional new cinematic style. As a result, Sanshiro stands as the incipient Kurosawa hero, a character embryo embodying many of the traits that would be given greater dimension in later protagonists by the incorporation of more potent social backdrops.

*Sanshiro Sugata* is set in 1882, "during the Meiji period, when Western influences were altering the sense of what it meant to be Japanese" (Prince 39). In the film, the competition between the established form of *jujitsu* and the newly revealed form of *judo* "stands for the struggle between the old ways of traditionalism and feudalism and the new ways of com-

petitive individualism" (Desser 63). Sanshiro is certainly a competitive individual; he begins the film by demanding to be taught *jujitsu*. Then, upon seeing his entire clan of mentors embarrassingly thwarted by a single master of *judo*, he immediately asks to be trained in this other technique. The *judo* master, named Yano, takes Sanshiro on as a student, and trains him until his skills are at a peak. Unfortunately, once his skills are honed, Sanshiro proceeds to flaunt them. He becomes a show-off, as exhibited in a deftly edited scene in which Sanshiro chases intimidated citizens up and down the town square, tossing wary villagers to the ground with malevolent glee. With this sequence, Kurosawa is "describing his central character and making clear the vanity and self-interest that Sanshiro will have to discard in his growth and pursuit of enlightenment" (Prince 45). Yano is infuriated with the actions of his pupil. He chastises Sanshiro for abusing the art of *judo*. "To act as you do," Yano asks, "without meaning or purpose, to hate and attack — is that the way of life? No — the way is loyalty and love...only through it can a man face death." Sanshiro, unreceptive to his teacher's lessons, insubordinately replies, "I can face death! I am not afraid to die right now!" He immediately rises, throws open the sliding door of Yano's home, and, in an impulsive, impudent display of rebellion, leaps into a pond below.

The following scene, set under the glimmering moonlight of a brisk evening, is key to the thematic outlay of the film. Sanshiro, clinging to an upright pole in the middle of the water, bears the perilous chill of the water in a fit of youthful stubbornness. During this time, his master ignores him, and the boy, becoming increasingly aware of his immaturity, is subject to a profound spiritual revelation, which Kurosawa illustrates semiotically. Sanshiro experiences a "moment of *satori*," which is essentially "a discovery of self ... predicated upon attaining the devotion and humility that ... are the truth of life" (Prince 50). This scene conveys a primary dilemma of the Kurosawa hero: "the discovery of self is a lonely process which no one else can assist, yet a life without devotion to an ideal, and frequently to a teacher, is a life of selfishness and vanity" (Prince 50). This type of scene, wherein the key character is removed from the guidance of others and desecrates the truth of his situation through his own volition, would continue to appear in future Kurosawa films, illustrating



the dynamism of his still unformed protagonist heroes.

The remainder of the film chronicles Sanshiro's rise to the status of *judo* champion. Ensuing matches demonstrate that he has learned to fight with the skill, restraint, and calmness "of one who has attained enlightenment" (Prince 45). These competitions also educate Sanshiro toward "the empty and illusory nature of glory" (Prince 50). In Sanshiro's final bout, an informal challenge from a mysterious opponent named Higaki, Kurosawa introduces another stylistic feature that arises again in later films: the primary villain as a foil for the hero. Kurosawa establishes Higaki as Sanshiro's double "through similar actions that he has each character repeat" (Prince 48). Higaki and other examples of the Kurosawa villain are not "villains" in the traditional sense; they are mirror images of the hero, similar yet reversed. Both the hero and the villain are equally steeped in the virtues and vices of life. The hero sees in the villain, "merely another man, and he feels compassion" (Richie 18). The opposition between the hero and the villain is a dialectical tool by which Kurosawa enhances the integrity of his protagonist. This theme will be discussed to a more specific, informative extent regarding *Stray Dog*.

Upon defeating Higaki, Sanshiro is depicted as leaving on a train in the company of a woman with whom he has fallen in love, his days of fighting in temporary reprieve. Back at Yano's household, the master and his assistants poke jovial fun at Sanshiro's newfound maturity. Scenes such as these, bathed in communal happiness and friendship, are early exceptions to a rule that Kurosawa will later emphasize. The narrative events of *Sanshiro Sugata*, because they lack the incisive social catalysis of Kurosawa's later films, are for the most part lacking in serious consequence. To quote author Stephen Prince, "*Sanshiro Sugata* lacks the socially critical dimension so important in the later films. Those heroes, too, learn discipline and dedication, but unlike them, Sanshiro does not place these values in the service of socially progressive action" (53). Unlike future Kurosawa heroes, "Sanshiro is permitted to retain his intimate connections to traditional normative sources: teacher, family, religion" (Prince 52). Later Kurosawa protagonists will not fare so well.

*Stray Dog* is a true Kurosawa original, based on a novel he wrote but never published, about a har-

ried police detective who loses his handgun to a pick pocket and vows to regain possession of it after the thief begins killing people (Richie 58). The director regards the film as one of his least favorite. He calls it, "too technical. All that technique and not one thought" (qtd. in Richie 62). This is true to a certain extent. *Stray Dog* is highly structured, more of a calculated equation than a contemplative narrative, which is not exactly a fault for a film of its kind: the detective-chase-thriller genre. Authors Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie refer to the film as, "probably the best detective picture ever made in Japan" (186). Along these lines, *Stray Dog* is extremely notable, and important to the examination within this paper, for the way it seizes hold of and boldly pursues the character definitions and narrative constructions that its stylistic predecessor, *Sanshiro Sugata*, either introduced and lightly asserted or was denied the chance to explore.

In *Stray Dog*, the historical flux and social reflexivity that Kurosawa kept minor and suppressed in *Sanshiro Sugata* bursts forth with a vengeance; its presence is known from the get-go. Unlike the previous film, in *Stray Dog* "the social milieu is an active part of the film rather than just an exotic background" (Anderson and Richie 186). The opening credits dissolve over the lingering close-up of a soiled, panting dog, its tongue lapping restlessly. Already, the diegetic environment is established; it's broiling hot. The time is the present, immediately following the rampant devastation of World War II. Kurosawa employs "extreme heat ... to show a whole city exhausted, fearful, defenseless ... prostrated by [their] new carpet-bagger civilization" (Richie 59).<sup>1</sup> The heat is ever-present; characters repeatedly wipe beads of sweat from their brows, guzzle down water, and vigorously fan themselves. The oppressive heat in *Stray Dog* "becomes thematized as a signifier of a world disjointed by economic collapse and the atomic threat" (Prince 261). Much like the collective consciousness of America following its defeat in the Vietnam War, the people of Japan find themselves saddled with a fractured national identity. *Stray Dog* becomes "a kind of epic of national reconstruction" (Prince 89). By using the heat of the environment as a thematic signal to constantly grasp the audience's attention, Kurosawa places his social deliberations on the frontal plane of the film.

Into this inferno of a diegesis comes the hero

of *Stray Dog*, the rookie detective Murakami (played by Toshiro Mufine, Kurosawa's representative screen stand-in), a determined, yet sensitive and fallible cherry whose recently completed service in the war designates him as a direct reactant to the tumultuous state of his nation. When his pistol is stolen by the thief at the onset of the story, he is practically debilitated, for the gun is a direct reflection of his status and being. The robbery is, in effect, a castration (Burch 296). The loss of the weapon is a loss of position, of manhood, of identity. Without it, Murakami has "no place in society. He becomes a stray" (Richie 59). The thief has yanked him down into the degradation and alienation of the present. Here, the dilemma of the Kurosawa hero is upgraded from its inconsequential beginnings. Whereas Sanshiro occupies "a brightly untroubled world where the ethic of submissiveness does not...entail a posture appropriate for being economically or politically exploited," Murakami, and all Kurosawa heroic figures who succeed him, must "confront a corrupt and predatory social order" (Prince 53). When bullets from some recent murders are matched with those from Murakami's gun, the search for retrieval becomes one of dire importance. Through the gun, the harried detective vicariously inherits the pain of the victims and the guilt of the murders.

Murakami begins his relentless quest to apprehend the homicidal criminal, and in doing so assumes the mold of the Kurosawa hero. The breakneck haste and endless dedication with which he pursues the case becomes an essential quality of the director's hero, who is "distinguished by his perseverance, by his refusal to be defeated" (Richie 18). To quote author and critic Donald Richie, "The Kurosawa hero is a man who continues in the very face of certain defeat" (61). This boundless tenacity is not only a Kurosawa stamp but also, "a basic cultural trait of Japan" (Burch 296). This was already evident in Sanshiro, who refused to be denied the chance to learn the martial arts. However, it becomes more stated in Murakami, because it is all he has. Murakami, being a Kurosawa hero, "refuses to give up even after everybody else is convinced he has already lost. This is the reason that he is always alone" (Richie 61). Indeed, Murakami is the first true loner figure in the Kurosawa oeuvre. He has a mentor (just as Sanshiro did in Yano), the elder, more experienced section chief Sato (played by Kurosawa's other screen figure-of-self, Takashi

Shimura), who aids Murakami in spearheading the investigation and forces him to keep his impulsive emotions in check. Because it is Murakami's gun that is stolen, however, and because the post-war iconoclasm most directly applies to him, the quest toward enlightenment is his.

Just as Sanshiro reached *satori* in the lotus-pond, Murakami is given his own pure-cinema sequence of self-realization that isolates him as the film's focal point. Following a lead, Murakami dresses himself as a recently returned soldier and goes undercover in the slums of Ueno and Asakusa, hoping to make contact with a black market gun dealer. For one entire eight-minute reel, Kurosawa eliminates dialogue and immerses Murakami in the decrepit back alley ghettos of post-war Japan (Anderson 340). He stumbles around, attempting to look displaced. He eats meager meals from vendors, sleeps in a flophouse, and is even questioned by a fellow officer who does not recognize him (Prince 90). He has become one of the transparent vagrants, the unidentified nameless strays that take sad comfort in the social, moral, and ethical void left by the war. It is at this point that Murakami begins to fully comprehend the situation of the man who stole his gun, and how little it differs from his own.

*Stray Dog* furthers another convention established initially by Kurosawa in *Sanshiro Sugata*: the villain as double to the hero. Almost immediately in the film, the killer, later revealed to be named Yusa, takes on a symmetrical relation to Murakami: he is using his gun, his code of identification. Murakami's excursion through the slums infuses him with sympathy for the utter depravity of Yusa's situation, though this still does not entirely absolve him in Murakami's mind. However, once Sato and Murakami begin questioning Yusa's cohorts and family, the motivations behind the killer's actions become clearer. Before long, "Murakami not only feels sorry for Yusa but accountable for him, just as he cannot escape a similar sense in connection with the suffering of Yusa's victims" (Prince 93). Murakami learns that, like himself, Yusa was a soldier in the war. Upon his return to Japan, all his possessions were stolen, dragging him into despair. Later, Yusa loses his rice ration card, and only then resorts to robbery and murder, actions that seem to him to be the only routes by which he can survive. Murakami feels, "a kinship to the criminal ... Similar past misfortune produces



the bond Murakami feels with the thief" (Prince 93). Their immediate post-war situations were very akin. If Murakami had been unfortunate enough to have had his possessions stolen upon returning home, what might have he have done to survive? Would he have turned to thievery? Murakami suggests that he himself might have, and it was the possibility of this inclination that made him to decide to become a cop (Prince 93). Murakami's experience with the war has taught him "about the power of circumstance to affect behavior," and Yusa becomes the misled Murakami who was not, but could have been (Prince 93). The similarity between the detective and the killer becomes more and more striking as the film proceeds, leading Murakami to question whether what Yusa has done is truly wrong. The question lingers unanswered until the final chase sequence, when Murakami tackles the fleeing Yusa in a grimy marsh. The two struggle in the mud, which covers their features until they cannot be told apart. When Yusa finally relents, the two fall to the ground together, "positioned similarly and framed symmetrically" by Kurosawa (Prince 94). At this point, Murakami reaffirms his moral standing; he retrieves his gun and apprehends Yusa. The question of how far this mirror-image symmetry of character might go is answered: Murakami maintains the status quo, arresting Yusa despite his identification with him and forcing the thief to accept responsibility for his crimes.

With *Stray Dog*, Kurosawa, "portrays a struggle to create a viable post-war social ethic" (Prince 89). Murakami exudes this ethic by foregoing his identification with a murderer to better serve justice. He demonstrates that, ultimately, "people are not determined by their social conditions but retain a power of will and action independent of circumstance" (Prince 95). Yusa is, essentially, not a brother to Murakami, but an "evil double, a doppelganger," whose unlawful actions are "symptomatic of the current social debris," and who himself "represents a national self crushed and deformed by the war and its aftermath" (Prince 94). Kurosawa has skillfully employed the dichotomy between his hero and his villain double as a framework for the urgent ethical calling demanded by the social environment of his pseudo-world.

*Ikiru* is often considered Kurosawa's masterpiece. It is also the film of which he is most fond (Mellen 38). The story follows a listless, mechanical

bureaucrat named Watanabe (Takashi Simura again) who learns of a fatal tumor in his stomach that leaves him only a year to live. "A year to live" becomes an ironic statement because, as the film shows, the last year of his life is the only time he will ever truly live. A narrator informs the audience early on, over the languid image of Watanabe stamping papers, that, "he is like a corpse, and actually he has been dead for the past twenty-five years." The film is an account of Watanabe's attempts to justify his existence, to reach an assured state of eudomonia infused with the knowledge that he has lived well. Kurosawa had depicted physical and spiritual bouts with disease previously in both *Drunken Angel* (1945) and *The Silent Duel* (1947), though *Ikiru* remains the ultimate life-affirmation and in turn, the most "supreme statement of Kurosawa's heroic cinema" (Prince 113).

Watanabe is the most dynamic of the Kurosawa heroes. His transformation in the film from an idle, paper-shuffling automaton to a resurrected human being capable of compassion and achievement is so strikingly documented that the audience does not doubt Watanabe's humanistic intentions even when he is not alive for the last half of the movie. The integrity of his metamorphosis remains intact even when co-workers, family members and detractors attending his wake shamelessly attempt to skewer the motivations behind his building a children's playground in a poor area of the city.

The rugged historical transition and social dilemma in *Ikiru* is centered around the post-war Japanese bureaucracy, of which Watanabe, at least at the beginning of the film, is the primary representative. In *Ikiru*, "the illness of an individual functions as a metaphor for a more general social and spiritual sickness" (Prince 81). Reforms instigated during the post-war occupation by the West have installed a circumlocutive, convoluted, and complexly inactive bureaucracy at the center of Japan's social milieu. This is yet another predatory social order that has emerged in the wake of World War II, though it is subtler in its oppression than the harsh decrepitude seen in *Stray Dog*. This new social scheme acts to suppress the individual under the guise of social philanthropy and efficacy. In an early sequence, both bitterly funny and infuriating, a group of concerned housewives approach the Citizen's Section in the hopes of getting an infected sump in their neighborhood drained and perhaps converted into a playground. With a long

series of transitional wipes, Kurosawa shows the workers of each department directing the women from office to office, avoiding commitment, passing the buck, until the women land right back where they started. One of the women's cries that "There is no democracy here!" refers to the impersonal reforms that the Occupation has implanted (Prince 103). In the office where Watanabe has spent his twenty-five years of service, the diverting run-around has become company protocol.

When the hero finally decides to take humanitarian action and pursue the construction of the park, his choice opposes everything the office has primed itself to do. Watanabe's noble actions are deflected, distorted, and misconstrued by the people at his wake because his act of human determination posed a silent subversive threat to the concerns and auspices of the bureaucracy within which they work. Watanabe's defiance of the bureaucracy's ideals is indicative of the Kurosawa hero's obligation to "reject the established coding of human relationships, especially to the extent that the imperative of sociability works to nullify the pursuit of individual goals" (Prince 111). He must, "reject the normative codes offered by established society in order to live in a politically and socially just manner" (Prince 52). This is the incontestable duty of the hero.

Another component of Watanabe's iconic supremacy over the other heroic Kurosawa protagonists is his complete embodiment of the "perseverance in the teeth of adversity" quality that "describes nearly every one of Kurosawa's main characters" (Burch 296). Their "masochistic perseverance in the fulfillment of complex social obligations" finds a startling fruition in Watanabe (Burch 296). There are many scenes in the final third of the movie when Watanabe, while working and picketing for the park, falls to the ground from exhaustion. It becomes clear that his campaign to build the playground is the only thing keeping him alive. In a scene late in the movie, Watanabe is walking through the construction site of the playground. He stumbles, and the women of the neighborhood help him to his feet and bring water. Kurosawa then cuts in to a close-up of the hero's face. In drinking the water from the ladle, the sun reflects off the liquid and projects gleaming ripples on the wrinkled skin under his eyes. It is a wonderful moment that perfectly manifests Watanabe's weary dedication, his persistence of vision, as the vehicles con-

structing his park and fulfilling his conception roar in the background.

Unfortunately, besides being the most fervently dedicated and teleologically successful of the Kurosawa heroes, Watanabe is also the most alone. Unlike Sanshiro and Murakami, he is "shorn of the support of families and loved ones or the defining identities offered by the corporation of the state" (Prince 52). An early montage sequence follows the protagonist's diagnosis, consisting of a series of flashbacks featuring Watanabe and his son, Mitsuo. One shows Watanabe and the infant Mitsuo driving to the funeral of Watanabe's first wife. Another shows Watanabe's disappointment as a teenage Mitsuo is tagged out during a baseball game. Another shows Watanabe calming his son before an appendectomy, then leaving his side to go to work. The last is at a train station, as Mitsuo is taken away to fight in the war. The flashbacks all exhibit moments of departure and abandonment, of "separations and emotional failure" (Prince 105). They reflect back to and maintain Watanabe's current estrangement from his son, a tragic consequence of his fruitless dedication to his aimless work.

The father and son are so alienated from each other's lives that Watanabe cannot bring himself to tell Mitsuo of his disease. Upon learning of his impending demise, Watanabe approaches his son for support, only to overhear Mitsuo and his greedy wife discussing their right to his inheritance. It dawns on Watanabe that he cannot embrace his son as the justification for his existence. There is nothing between them. By the end of the film, Watanabe states, "I have no son." His endeavor to legitimize his life must be a solitary one, without the accompaniment of his family, outside the designations of his work place, and most importantly, inside himself. Watanabe develops as a hero "by separating from [his son, his son's wife, and his co-workers], rebelling against, and rejecting the institutional frameworks of modern Japanese society, that is, the family and the company" (Prince 107). Watanabe discovers this truth at an upscale restaurant, where several young waitresses are preparing a birthday celebration. In an astute use of vertical montage, Kurosawa juxtaposes the crowd's singing of "Happy Birthday" with Watanabe's epiphany. It is his final rebirth. He becomes an entirely autonomous figure, a bastion of the individuality for which Kurosawa shows such a profound ap-



preciation. For, "in arguing for the autonomous self as positive value in postwar Japan, Kurosawa overturns, and in a sense reverses, centuries of tradition in which an individual's range of choice was consumed and . . . determined by the ties of family, class, and clan" (Prince 97). Watanabe is a pioneer, a moral trailblazer, and a model for the change in attitudes and outlooks of the audience as they traverse the radically different post-war world.

*Yojimbo* begins during a time of similar cap-sized traditions. An opening title informs the audience that the story is set in the late Tokugawa era, a time "when a rising business class threatened the logic of existing social relations as the economy shifted to money not rice, and to the ties mediated by the exchange of commodities and the rationalizations of profit, not personal allegiance and obligations" (Prince 222). In *Yojimbo*, "Kurosawa discovers Japan through critical moments of transition in Japanese history when decaying values have lost their universal acceptances and new modes have neither clearly emerged nor fully displaced the old" (Mellen 39). Into the frame, in an over-the-shoulder, telephoto close-up, marches a samurai, Sanjuro (Toshiro Mifune). He is out of a job, because the ushering in of the new business era has been accompanied by a disintegration of the feudal structures under which the samurai thrived. He walks into a town split by two warring factions, one owned by a *saké* merchant, the other by a silk trader, each with their own respective gang of murderous thugs. For seemingly arbitrary reasons and minute financial gain, the cunning samurai hires himself out to both gangs, playing both sides against the middle, until both families are entirely wiped out.

The film is, irrefutably, a parable for the rise of capitalism, for the year it was made, 1963, marked the time when Japan was changing from an agriculturally-oriented economy to an industrial one (Desser 99). The war-ridden town is "a microcosm of the contemporary corporate state" (Prince 222). Kurosawa also cites his creation of *Yojimbo* as a backlash against the actions of the Yakuza, the Japanese answer to organized crime: "I was so fed up with the world of the Yakuza. So in order to attack their evil and irrationality . . . I brought in the super-samurai" (qtd. in Mellen 57). Whether its denizens are representative of the mob or big business, the town in *Yojimbo* is a cesspool chock full of lowly, amoral types with no sense of integrity or honor, each of whose

only concern is wreaking damage on the competing clan in a zero-sum war. It is not a town worth saving.

This is the exactly the sentiment of Sanjuro. Upon surveying the town, he bluntly states, with a tinge of bitter humor, "It would be better if they were all dead." Sanjuro is a new kind of Kurosawa hero. He is nomadic and outdated, without a society to frame him. His villainous double, Unosuke, the enforcer brother of one of the *saké* family's henchman, reemphasizes the anachronistic quality of Sanjuro. Unosuke, like Sanjuro, enjoys killing, but his preferred weapon is not a sword, but a pistol. The presence of the gun in the film mocks the samurai sword as a primitive relic. As critic Pauline Kael writes, "The ridiculous little gun means the end of the warrior caste: killing is going to become so easy that it will be democratically available to all" (60). The samurai warrior has no place in a society where everyone is equally capable of killing.

Sanjuro is a social pariah. He feels no kinship with a collective group of people, so social welfare does not occur to him, which distinguishes him from the heroes of *Stray Dog* and *Ikiru*. Both of those films were planted during "a time when the capacity of heroic action to regenerate society seemed a real possibility" (Prince 185). Sanjuro would rather just eliminate the two families, an apocalyptic act for which he shows no apparent motivation. He has, "no ethical reason for doing so, no ideal to which he commits" (Prince 223). There is a key moment in the early scenes of *Yojimbo* relating specifically to the metamorphosing of the Kurosawa hero. The Seibe clan has hired Sanjuro, and an attack on the Ushi-Tora family is announced. The older bodyguard, Homma, whom Sanjuro has replaced, decides to flee the situation. With Sanjuro in the foreground, we see Homma hop a fence, wave to Sanjuro, and then run off into the distance. Homma is played by Susumu Fujita, the same actor who played Sanshiro Sugata. This scene, "becomes self-referential, a scene in which the two heroes, past and present, of Kurosawa's cinema meet. . . . As Fujita says good-bye to Mifune and takes off down that road, Kurosawa's cinema bids farewell to its youthful, idealistic hero in favor of the alienated persona incarnated by Mifune" (Prince 230).

The nihilistic undercurrent of Sanjuro's cleansing of the town might be distressing if the tone of

*Yojimbo* was not essentially comical. The movie is not a somber commentary with a serious prescription like *Stray Dog* and *Ikiru*; it is a dream world, a violent fantasy, in which a hero exists with enough raw skill and ability to wipe out all of society's evil. Pauline Kael calls it "a killing comedy" (61). *Yojimbo*, "substitutes a giddy cackle in place of *Ikiru's* sobriety" (Prince 221). Sanjuro is, as Kurosawa stated, a super-samurai. The director created him out of pure wish fulfillment as an indestructible extension of his desire for the ultimate justice. To quote Stephen Prince, "What makes *Yojimbo* such a remarkable film is its emphasis upon Sanjuro's artificiality and its giddy celebration of the power of the wish" (224). The villains, too, are extreme comic caricatures. One is a giant, malformed ogre; another resembles a fat chipmunk. They scuttle around "with crustacean-like movements" (Prince 228). Even the film's climax, a veritable buffet of bloodletting and destruction that litters the town's streets with bodies, is a tickler. After vanquishing the last of the outlaws, Sanjuro sheaths his sword, looks around contentedly and says, "Now there will be quiet in this town."

The combined effect of all this cartoon-quality mayhem is a scathing, satirical indictment of the competitions that had arisen in Japan around the time of *Yojimbo's* creation. Kurosawa views capitalism and organized crime, institutions fueled by the acquisition of money and the elimination of rivals, as trivial, ridiculous, and utterly negligible to society. They must be eliminated. Unfortunately, the Kurosawa hero, the moral role model responsible for directing society past these defects, suffers in the process. He must become a fantastical apparition; a soiled vagabond who kills for sport and money, with no real

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Kurosawa would do this again to similar effect in *Record of a Living Being* (1955).

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