



JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Yojimbo

Kurosawa on 'Yojimbo'

For a long time I had wanted to make a really interesting film – and it finally turned into this picture. The story is so ideally interesting that it's surprising no one else ever thought of it. The idea is about rivalry on both sides, and both sides are equally bad. We all know what this is like. Here we are, weakly caught in the middle, and it is impossible to choose between the evils. [I doubt that Kurosawa intended any political implication. He is not interested in politics. The moral aspects of the problem – of any problem – appeal to him most.] Myself, I've always wanted somehow or other to stop such senseless battles of bad against bad, but we are all more or less weak: I've never been able to. And that is why the hero of this film is different from us. He is capable of standing squarely in the middle and stopping the fight. At any rate, this was the beginning of the film in my mind.

It was truly an enormous popular hit. Everyone at the company said it was because of the sword-fighting. But that is not so, the reason was the character of the hero and what he does. He is a real hero, he has a real reason for fighting. He doesn't just stand by and wave his sword around.

Akira Kurosawa interviewed by Donald Richie, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1964

John Sayles on 'Yojimbo'

What haunts you about Yojimbo?

It's just my favourite movie. It's about a lone samurai, Sanjuro [Toshiro Mifune], who hires himself out to the two warring factions in a small town, resulting in the eradication of both. [Its plot became the model for Sergio Leone's 1964 *A Fistful of Dollars*, with Clint Eastwood in the Mifune role.] I knew a little about Japanese culture when I first saw *Yojimbo*, but what I got out of it was the impression of a very caste-oriented society which has broken down. An American-style individual – a guy named Sanjuro – enters, and it turns into a Western fairly easily. It's somewhat based on Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*: all of a sudden there's this guy who keeps a personal code, even if he's not in a traditional society anymore. The US has never been a traditional society, but there are these characters who are admired – whether they are Sam Spade or The Man with No Name or whatever – who have some kind of personal code, but not necessarily a moral one. If your partner gets killed, you're supposed to do something about it: this is the line of action of a Sam Spade, or a Clint Eastwood character. You don't step on a man's hat, or whatever it is. It's personal, individualistic, very existential – something which is very strong in American movies. Existentialism confronting consumerism, profit and greed, a direction that society goes into once tradition and Royalty is gone.

In Japan, there was this incredible breaking up of society after the shogun era was over. Merchants were a new class, who could become very powerful. The same thing happened in Britain at the time of Magna Carta, and later during the slave and sugar trade. Suddenly, there's this incredible *nouveau riche* appetite for things. So what does somebody who is basically the guard

for the monarchy do when the monarchy or old ways are gone? Do you just become a bodyguard? A hitman, a hired gun for the cattle barons?

Or do you stand outside that somehow, and say, 'I'm not going to pick on the weak for the strong. That's against my personal code. Yeah, I would kill weak people for the Royalty, but the Royalty is gone.' The reason to kill that seemed to have any sense is gone.

But those thematic points are made quite viscerally, aren't they?

Yojimbo works as a movie, from the first scene. The energy of the music grabbed me the first time I saw it. It's one of the best soundtracks I've ever heard, this great mixture of Western-style music with Japanese-style music, using traditional instruments, such as woodblocks. But elements of that soundtrack are also used as part of the story, for example with the guy who uses woodblocks to call people from the village.

Masaru Sato, who did the score, composes in an analogous fashion to both Max Steiner and Alfred Newman. Sometimes he underlines everything with the woodblocks, or he'll have a piccolo for one character, a woodblock for somebody else, and something very deep for another character, and then sometimes he just lets it play through. It's very well and subtly used, so that you don't remember a big orchestra, Steiner-style, blowing you away – it's all in the service of the picture.

And there are subtle effects on the soundtrack as well, such as the dogs barking...

One thing I always try to do in my own films is remember that when you enter a movie, you're entering a world that's like a culture with its own rules. I think if you do a movie well, and people believe it, it's less a question of whether it's realistic or non-realistic or whatever, than that you've set those rules up well and then stayed true to them.

The opening scene of *Yojimbo* sets up its rules in just this way. You see this guy walking along, a samurai. He scratches himself. Two things are explained without a word: this guy's a samurai and he's down on his luck – he's itchy, he's got fleas. And then he gets to the crossroads and throws his stick up into the air; he's an existential guy, so it doesn't matter where he goes. And pretty much the next thing you see is a dog with a human hand in its mouth, and you basically think, 'This is a tough town, if this is how the chamber of commerce greets you.' Then the samurai walks into town and sees these cartoon characters, these bad guys, on both sides. Quickly, with the music and those pictures and not even any dialogue yet, you are told the story. The world you're entering is laid out, the world you're going to be in for two hours.

One of the reasons I really like *Yojimbo* is that although there are elements which we care about and can get emotionally involved in, there is also a cartoon element to it, an extremeness about it. Everything's a little bit heightened. There's this giant and a guy who looks like a pig and all that, whereas with Toshiro Mifune, even though he has a layer of comedy in his character, you buy this character. He could be in a very realistic movie.

You're known as a director who has a particular skill in working with actors, especially first-time actors. Given that, what do you notice about how Kurosawa handles his cast?

Mifune was a really good actor, and a very good *physical* actor. One of the things I often look for in an actor is how do they move. The two best American physical actors I've ever seen are Steve McQueen, and David Strathairn, who

I’ve worked with a bunch of times. Both he and McQueen are people you just like to watch on screen. McQueen could erase 20 of his lines and improve the character, because there was something that he did with his body that seemed to compensate.

Mifune was the same kind of actor – very physical, and capable of playing lots of different characters, from very violent guys to guys who are a little bit repressed. And then as this great counterpoint there’s the villain Unosuke, played by Tatsuya Nakadai, who I’ve seen in so many other movies, but who was a theatre actor. Here he’s in his Tony Curtis phase, very pretty, and thus in opposition to this hairy, scratchy, itchy anti-hero good guy that Mifune plays. Nakadai is given this beautiful movie-idol introduction, but when he pulls out the gun you realise there’s a sleazy side to this very pretty guy, and that makes you realise that this is something which will change the whole equation.

Yojimbo is not purely a comedy, though it isn’t tragic either, as *Seven Samurai* is – and it demonstrates an understanding of how to mix a broad range of acting styles. It’s one of the few movies I’ve seen where that mix works.

John Sayles interviewed by Leslie Felperin, *Sight and Sound*, September 1996

YOJIMBO

Director: Akira Kurosawa
©: Toho Co. Ltd.
Production Companies: Kurosawa Productions, Toho Co. Ltd.
Producers: Tomoyuki Tanaka, Ryuzo Kikushima
Production Supervisor: Hiroshi Nezu
Assistant Production Supervisor: Shigeru Nakamura
Chief Assistant Director: Shiro Moritani
Assistant Directors: Masanobu Deme, Yasuhiro Yoshimatsu, Yoshikumi Wada
Script Supervisor: Teruyo Nogami
Screenplay: Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa
Screenplay: Hideo Oguni *
Director of Photography: Kazuo Miyagawa
Lighting: Choshiro Ishii
Assistant Lighting: Shoji Kaneko
Assistant Cinematographer: Takao Saito
Stills Photography: Masao Fukuda
Assistant Editor: Reiko Kaneko
Art Director: Yoshiro Muraki
Assistant Art Director: Yoshifumi Honda
Properties: Koichi Hamamura
Costumes: Yoshiro Muraki, Masahiro Kato
Hair: Yoshiko Matsumoto, Junjiro Yamada
Music: Masaru Sato
Choreography: Hiroshi Kanesu
Sound: Choshichiro Mikami, Hisashi Shimonaga
Assistant Sound: Zen Shida
Sound Mixer: Masanobu Miyazaki
Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa
Transportation: Ginzo Osumi
Swordplay Instructor: Yushio Sugino
Swordplay Technique: Ryu Kuze

Cast

Toshiro Mifune (*Sanjuro Kuwabatake*)
Eijirô Tono (*Gonji, the saké seller*)
Seizaburô Kawazu (*Seibei, Tazaemon’s henchman*)
Isuzu Yamada (*Orin, Seibei’s wife*)
Hiroshi Tachikawa (*Yoichiro, Seibei’s son*)
Susumu Fujita (*Honma, the ex-yojimbo*)
Kyu Sazanka (*Ushitora, Tokuemon’s henchman*)
Daisuke Katô (*Inokichi, Ushitora’s brother*)
Tatsuya Nakadai (*Unosuke, Ushitora’s younger brother*)

Kamatari Fujiwara (*Tazaemon, the silk merchant*)
Takashi Shimura (*Tokuemon, the saké merchant*)
Atsushi Watanabe (*coffin maker*)
Ikio Sawamura (*Hansuke*)
Akira Nishimura (*Kuma*)
Yoshio Tsuchiya (*Kohei, a farmer*)
Yôko Tsukasa (*Nui, farmer’s wife*)
Yôsuke Natsuki (*farmer’s son*)
Jerry Fujio (*Roku*)
Takeshi Kato (*Ronin Kobuhachi*)
Ichiro Nakaya (*first samurai*)
Sachio Sakai (*first foot soldier*)
Akira Tani (*Kame*)
Namigoro Rashomon (*Kannuki*)
Gen Shimizu (*Magotaro*)
Yutaka Sada (*Matsukichi*)
Shin Otomo (*Kumosuke*)
Shoichi Hirose (*Ushitora follower*)
Hideyo Amamoto (*Yahachi*)
Shôji ‘ki (*Sukeju*)
Fuminori Ohashi (*second samurai*)
Hiroshi Yoseyama (*farmer*)
Senkichi Omura (*traveller*)
Fumiko Homma (*ex-wife of farmer*)
Ryusuke Nishio, Naoya Kusama, Nadao Kirino,
Jun Otomo (*Seibei followers*)
Shinpei Takagi, Sho Kusama, Yasuzo Ogawa,
Hiroshi Takagi (*Ushitora followers*)
Junichiro Kukai, Fumiyoshi Kamagaya
(*Seibei followers*)
Ichiro Chiba (*second foot soldier*)
Haruya Sakamoto (*Ushitora follower*)
Rinsaku Ogata (*Seibei follower*)
Fumio Kogushi (*Ushitora follower*)
Yoko Terui (*woman at Seibei’s house*)
Hiromi Mineoka (*woman at Seibei’s house*)
Michiko Kawa (*woman at Seibei’s house*)
Japan 1961©
110 mins

* Uncredited

The screenings on Fri 19 Nov and Sun 28 Nov include a screening of **Inside Cinema: Akira Kurosawa** (2021, 6 mins)

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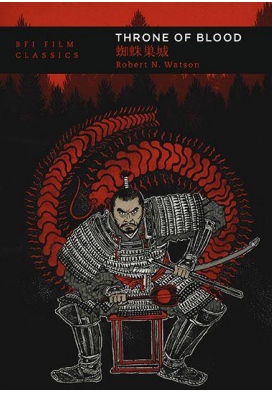
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Throne of Blood (new edition) by Robert N. Watson is available to buy from the BFI Shop: <https://shop.bfi.org.uk/pre-order-throne-of-blood-bfi-film-classics.html>



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Early Summer (Bakushû)

Mon 18 Oct 14:30; Tue 19 Oct 20:35; Wed 20 Oct 17:50; Thu 18 Nov 20:20 (+ intro by Professor Alastair Phillips, University of Warwick); Sun 21 Nov 11:30

The Flavour of Green Tea over Rice (Ochazuke no aji)

Mon 18 Oct 18:10; Wed 20 Oct 20:40; Thu 21 Oct 14:40; Mon 8 Nov 14:30; Tue 23 Nov 14:40

Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)

Mon 18 Oct 20:20; Thu 21 Oct 14:30; Sat 13 Nov 14:10; Tue 30 Nov 14:00

Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jô)

Tue 19 Oct 18:10; Thu 21 Oct 20:35 (+ Inside Cinema: Akira Kurosawa); Wed 27 Oct 20:30; Tue 9 Nov 20:40; Fri 12 Nov 14:15 (+ Inside Cinema: Akira Kurosawa); Sat 27 Nov 20:50

Early Spring (Sôshun)

Tue 19 Oct 14:30; Wed 20 Oct 20:15; Thu 21 Oct 17:30; Sat 20 Nov 14:50; Tue 23 Nov 17:40

Yojimbo

Tue 19 Oct 20:55; Thu 21 Oct 17:55; Fri 19 Nov 14:30 (+ Inside Cinema: Akira Kurosawa); Fri 26 Nov 18:10; Sun 28 Nov 12:00 15 (+ Inside Cinema: Akira Kurosawa)

An Actor’s Revenge (Yukinojô henge)

Wed 20 Oct 14:15; Mon 1 Nov 14:30; Thu 11 Nov 20:40 (+ intro by Jennifer Coates, The University of Sheffield); Sat 20 Nov 12:15

Souls on the Road (Rojô no reikion)

Fri 22 Oct 18:00; Sat 30 Oct 15:30

A Page of Madness (Kurutta ichipeiji)

Sat 23 Oct 13:00; Mon 15 Nov 20:50

Silent Cinema presents: I Was Born, But... (Otona no miru ehon – Umarete wa mita keredo)

Sat 23 Oct 15:00; Sun 28 Nov 14:45 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive curator)

Our Neighbour, Miss Yae (Tonari no Yae-chan)

Sun 24 Oct 12:40; Mon 1 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby)

Humanity and Paper Balloons (Ninjô kami fûsen)

Sun 24 Oct 15:00; Tue 2 Nov 20:45

Talk: A Time of Change and How Japanese Film Bore Witness to It

Mon 25 Oct 18:20

Children of the Beehive (Hachi no su no kodomotachi)

Mon 25 Oct 20:45 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby); Mon 8 Nov 18:20

The Life of Matsu the Untamed (aka The Rickshaw Man) (Muhomatsu no issho)

Tue 26 Oct 20:40; Sun 7 Nov 11:40

Fallen Blossoms (aka Flowers Have Fallen) (Hana chirinu)

Sun 31 Oct 13:00; Wed 3 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by Japanese film scholar Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández)

My Love Has Been Burning (aka Flame of My Love) (Waga koi wa moenu)

Fri 5 Nov 18:30; Mon 15 Nov 17:40

Love Letter (Koibumi)

Sat 6 Nov 12:30; Sun 21 Nov 14:40 (+ intro by Irene González-López, co-editor of ‘Tanaka Kinuyo: Nation, Stardom and Female Subjectivity’)

An Inn at Osaka (Ôsaka no yado)

Sat 6 Nov 15:30; Sun 21 Nov 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor Hiroshi Kitamura, College of William & Mary)

Godzilla (Gojira)

Sun 7 Nov 15:50; Tue 23 Nov 20:40

Marital Relations (Meoto zenzai)

Sun 7 Nov 18:20; Thu 25 Nov 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor Hideaki Fujiki, Nagoya University)

Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)

Mon 8 Nov 20:40; Sun 28 Nov 18:20

She Was Like a Wild Chrysanthemum (Nogiku no gotoki kimi nariki)

Tue 9 Nov 18:20; Tue 30 Nov 20:40

Harakiri (Seppuku)

Wed 10 Nov 18:00; Tue 16 Nov 20:25

Night Drum (Yoru no tsuzumi)

Wed 10 Nov 20:50; Tue 16 Nov 18:15

J-HORROR WEEKENDER

Ring (Ringu)

Fri 29 Oct 18:10

Dark Water (Honogurai mizu no soko kara)

Fri 29 Oct 20:30

Cure (Kyua)

Sat 30 Oct 18:00

Pulse (Kairo)

Sat 30 Oct 20:40

Audition (Ôdishon)

Sun 31 Oct 15:20

Ichii the Killer (Koroshiya 1)

Sun 31 Oct 18:00

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