



**JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA**

# Harakiri (Seppuku)

Masaki Kobayashi's first samurai film is one of the genre's major masterpieces, not least for its exploration and criticism of the ritual facades governing the samurai code of honour – if notions of 'honour' can legitimately be applied to what is forensically exposed as a viciously hypocritical system that renders men penniless and children fatherless thanks to an unbending refusal to take context and individual circumstance into account.

It's set in 1630, a time of peace that proves paradoxically disastrous for the samurai who contributed to the Tokugawa shogunate's victory during prolonged civil conflict. Deprived of their very *raison d'être*, many former samurai have been forced to become wandering ronin, explicitly forbidden to take on any other kind of employment (one is seen fruitlessly queuing for a labouring job) and treated with widespread mistrust. Desperate to stave off starvation, they devise a scam that involves presenting themselves at the gates of the fortresses of the few extant clans, demanding their right as samurai to commit harakiri (or, more accurately, seppuku, the film's Japanese title) with all the attendant pomp and ceremony.

In most cases, the supplicants are contemptuously paid off (which of course was their intended outcome), but on one occasion the Iyi clan's senior counsellor Kageyu Saito (Rentarô Mikuni) decides to assert his authority in his leader's absence by insisting that Motome Chijiwa (Akira Ishihama) goes through with the ceremony, even when it becomes clear that not only does Chijiwa not want to do it, but he even lacks the necessary equipment, having sold his two samurai swords some time earlier and replaced them with bamboo facsimiles. Unmoved, Saito insists that he use them instead.

This early scene and its barely watchable conclusion presents Kobayashi's anti-feudal argument in kernel form, but the bulk of the surrounding narrative remains to be fleshed out by the older samurai Hanshiro Tsugumo (Tatsuya Nakadai). Saito initially assumes that he intends to pull off the same trick as Chijiwa, but as Tsugumo gradually reveals his motives in lacerating detail, it becomes clear that he has a very different outcome in mind. A few drops of agreeably dark comedy (three supposedly fearless warriors all pull unexpected sickies for the same reason) leaven an inexorable accretion of human tragedy that turns positively Shakespearean well before the end.

Kobayashi's control of this material is masterly throughout. Most of cinematographer Yoshio Miyajima's widescreen compositions are, like Nakadai's unnervingly calm basso delivery, deceptively measured and tranquil, the camera gliding serenely through the Iyi clan's various rooms before coming to rest in the courtyard where much of the drama takes place. The ritualistic staging is deliberately contrasted with the horrors unveiled in flashback by Tsugumo's deceptively calm narrative: after so much tension, the climactic swordfights come as cathartic relief.

The film's production coincided with a revival of interest in traditional Japanese musical instruments that had fallen out of favour after the war, and Toru Takemitsu's score is quite unlike that of Fumio Hayazaki's more westernised accompaniments to earlier samurai films by Kurosawa and Mizoguchi. He makes particularly eloquent use of the biwa, or Japanese lute, whether plucked to emphasise individual gestures or strummed continuously as a background to a more elaborate set piece.

**Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, November 2011**

Kobayashi's style, as his *Ningen no Joken* trilogy demonstrated, is all too easy to label as 'heavy'. Here, however, his slow, measured cadence perfectly matches his subject. The essence of harakiri is its rigid ritual: the white ceremonial kimono, the sleeves tucked under the knees to prevent the body falling backwards, the victim's own sword placed to hand, the swordsman standing courteously by for the *coup de grâce*, the sword thrust made from left to right and then upwards. The whole ritual is neat, fastidious, unhurried, and the film captures exactly these qualities in the geometric precision of its compositions and camera movements, the reticence which precedes the sudden bursts of action, the calm intricacy of its flashback structure. The dominating image is of Tsugumo sitting neatly in the centre of the white harakiri mat, which is placed exactly in the centre of the courtyard, round the edge of which the samurai of the Iyi Clan form a square barrier of swords and spears; the camera moves slowly in behind Tsugumo as he begins to speak, as if politely reluctant to disturb his concentration, then cuts smoothly into flashback.

Round this recurring image, the story itself is beautifully constructed to ensnare the audience with its flashback technique into taking Kobayashi's point about the meaninglessness of harakiri and honour. It is only when the whole story has been pieced together in reverse, that one realises the full, bitter irony of the situation: that the young samurai has been forced into a cruelly futile suicide by people who themselves live by the code only if the public eye is turned on them.

*Harakiri* is on occasion brutal, particularly in the young samurai's terrible agony with his bamboo sword, and in the final, pointless holocaust: necessarily so, for the act of harakiri, in spite of its graceful preliminaries, is brutal, and Kobayashi has to make his point graphically. Elsewhere, however, reticence and stylisation predominate. When Tsugumo hears that his closest friend intends harakiri, for instance, the camera follows urgently as he rushes headlong down a flight of stone steps, but when he bursts into the room, he (and the audience) are faced by a screen which blocks the view; and Tsugumo's great sword battle on a windswept heath with Omodaka, the most skilful of the three swordsmen, is stylised in Kabuki manner with great sweeping strokes and gestures so that it becomes a stunningly choreographed dance.

Curiously enough, Tatsuya Nakadai's brilliant, Mifune-like performance as Tsugumo, which turns him almost into a legendary hero, should work against Kobayashi's anti-militaristic purpose, but in fact doesn't. Like all great legendary heroes, Tsugumo resorts to violence in a good cause; and his demonstration of unshakeable courage and probity becomes almost a ritual denunciation of the hollow concept of honour by which he and his like are expected to live. But even if one feels – as some critics have remarked – that being gory is not the best way to deplore wanton bloodshed, *Harakiri* still looks splendid with its measured tracking shots, its slow zooms, its reflective overhead shots of the courtyard, and its frequent poised immobility. And one sequence, at least, might not have shamed Mizoguchi: the sequence in which Tsugumo and Omodaka stride through a strange and ghostly graveyard to the heath where the wind ruffles through the long grass as they begin their wild, statuesque duel.

**Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1965**

**HARAKIRI (SEPPUKU)**

*Director:* Masaki Kobayashi  
*Production Company:* Shochiku Co. Ltd.  
*Producer:* Tatsuo Hosoya  
*Assistant Producer:* Ginichi Kishimoto  
*Screenplay:* Shinobu Hashimoto  
*Based on the novel by:* Yasuhiko Takiguchi  
*Director of Photography:* Yoshio Miyajima  
*Editor:* Hisashi Sagara  
*Art Directors:* Jun-Ichi Ozumi, Shigemasa Toda  
*Music:* Toru Takemitsu  
*Sound:* Hideo Nishizaki  
*Fencing Master:* Seiji Iho

**Cast**

Tatsuya Nakadai (*Hanshiro Tsugumo*)  
Shima Iwashita (*Miho Tsugumo*)  
Akira Ishihama (*Motome Chijiiwa*)  
Yoshio Inaba (*Jinnai Chijiiwa*)  
Rentarô Mikuni (*Kageyu Saito*)  
Masao Mishima (*Tango Inaba*)  
Tetsurô Tanba (*Hikokuro Omodaka*)  
Ichiro Nakaya (*Hayato Yazaki*)  
Yoshio Aoki (*Umenosuke Kawabe*)  
Jo Azumi (*Ichiro Shimmen*)  
Hisashi Igawa, Shoji Kobayashi, Ryo Takeuchi (*young samurai*)  
Shichisaburo Amatsu (*page*)  
Kei Sato (*Masakazu Fukushima*)

Japan 1962  
134 mins

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