

The Super-Samurai and the Anti-Hero

“In my childhood, America was like a religion. . . Then, real-life Americans abruptly entered my life – in jeeps – and upset all my dreams. . . I found them very energetic, but also very deceptive. They were no longer the Americans of the West. They were soldiers like any others: materialists, possessive, keen on pleasures and earthly goods.”— Sergio Leone, Interview

“I was fed up with the world of the *Yakuza* [Japanese gangsters]. So in order to attack their evil and irrationality, and thoroughly mess them up, I brought in the super-samurai played by Mifune. He was himself an outsider, a kind of outlaw, which enabled him to act flexibly, if sometimes recklessly. Only such a samurai of the imagination much more powerful than a real samurai, could mess up these gangsters.”—Kurosawa, Interview with Joan Mellen, 1975

Global Questions

- Are *Yojimbo* and *Fistful of Dollars* simply glorifying violence?
- Should violence be funny? If so, under what conditions?
- Should either or both films be read as an indictment of modern society? Why or why not?
- Furthermore, can either film be said to have a moral message?
- What are the consolations, seductions, and poetic justice of the final showdown in films?
- Can Sanjuro or “Joe” be said to be a hero in any classic sense of the word?

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène, which literally means, “placement upon the stage,” is a term in film studies for the comprehensive directorial vision of a scene’s (or a whole film’s) time and place, as well as often its overall ambiance. As a result mise-en-scène encompasses sets (or location) lighting, space and composition, the costumes, makeup and hairstyles of actors, and the overall type of film stock used to create effects, shades, and colors. Mise-en-scène also refers to the unified and intentional world offered by the film, or the lack thereof.

The comprehensiveness of the term is both its strength and its weakness because one is trying to capture whether a large number of elements succeed in evoking a cinematic vision. As a result, mise-en-scène can be (and often is) used in rather muddy, vague ways, so much so that many critics have refused the term as lacking precision or clarity.

For some, such as the French critic Andre Bazin, mise-en-scène was not only a tool for analysis, but a tool for making mimetic judgments about the realism of a film. Bazin argued that long takes, wide shots, deep focus, and cutting that stressed continuity rather than montage or experiment were more objective and realistic, and thus offered a world more as humans actually experienced it. There are a number of reasons to challenge Bazin’s claims, but one in particular has to do with what is the best kind of cinematic vision to examine the subjective and imaginative world.

What do you think? How would you describe the mise-en-scène of *Yojimbo* or *Fistful of Dollars*? Do Kurosawa and Leone offer us consistent and powerful visions? Do their visions do justice to reality? To the world as it is?

***Yojimbo* (1961), Akira Kurosawa [110 min]**

Sanjuro and Musashi

Between 1954 and 1956, director Hiroshi Inagaki brought out three films about the life of Miyamoto Musashi, a famous seventeenth-century ronin samurai: *Samurai I: Musashi Miyamoto* (1954); *Samurai II: Duel at Ichijoji Temple* (1955); *Samurai III: Duel at Ganryu Island* (1956). Played by Toshiro Mifune, Musashi is presented as an incredibly powerful samurai who must learn the self-discipline, honor, and compassion of the bushido code. Mifune became the face of Musashi the super-samurai for the Japanese public. Five years later, Kurosawa would invoke that character with his creation of the rough and ill-tempered Sanjuro. Even though Kurosawa insisted that his vision of the samurai had changed in no fundamental way in his career, with *Yojimbo*, he offered a comic and brutal vision of the super-samurai that at least existed alongside the more ideal Musashi.



1. How does the opening musical score and cinematography create a set of expectations about the yet-unnamed Sanjuro?
2. How much does the film owe to American Westerns?
3. How does the innkeeper become a necessary narrator of the centers of power and corruption in the story? Why does Kurosawa use the compositional technique of having the innkeeper and Sanjuro look through various windows and shutters?
4. How does Sanjuro expand yet trouble the traditional conception of the samurai?
5. How important is the comic tone to the film? What does it suggest about the film's mise-en-scène? Does that tone stay consistent throughout?
6. Unosuke (Uno) has been described as a samurai version of the criminal dandy. Would you agree?
7. Is the "apocalyptic" ending (to quote Stephen Prince) the only way the film could have ended?

***Fistful of Dollars* (1964), Sergio Leone [99 min]**



1. How does the Man with No Name (“Joe”) compare and contrast with Sanjuro in the opening scenes?
2. How does Ramon compare with Uno?
3. Why does Marisol play a more pronounced role in the film?
4. It has been argued that San Miguel represents modern capitalism. Is this a fair interpretation?
5. Why does Leone use so many closeups?
6. Do the movies have fundamentally different tones? Why or why not?
7. How different is Joe’s final assessment of the victory from Sanjuro’s?

The Grotesque & the Banality of Evil

I mention *Fistful of Dollars* as an example of the element of the grotesque this week in the worldview reading materials; however, I want to highlight here the message that the grotesque can offer us about evil and ask whether this can tell us a lie. Hannah Arendt in her famous 1963 work on the trial of Nazi concentration camp organizer, Adolf Eichmann, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, coined the famous phrase “the banality of evil” to describe the manner of Eichmann, who rather than appearing as a macabre super-villain, appeared as a mild-mannered bureaucrat who insisted again and again that he had simply been “doing his job.” More disturbing was that six Jewish psychologists examined Eichmann for the trial and none found him to be suffering from any disorder or neurosis. Arendt wrote of him:

Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a "monster," but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown. And since this suspicion would have been fatal to the entire enterprise [his trial], and was also rather hard to sustain in view of the sufferings he and his like had caused to millions of people, his worst clowneries were hardly noticed and almost never reported.

Do we want our villains to be more like the Rojos? Why or why not?