

Yale Council on East Asian Studies
Spring Japanese Film Series
Some Special Samurai
February–March 2016

Thursday, February 25, 2016

Yojimbo

Yōjinbō 用心棒

Tōhō 東宝, released April 25, 1961, 7 reels

110 minutes

Director: Kurosawa Akira

Script: Kikushima Ryūzō, Kurosawa Akira

Cinematography: Miyagawa Kazuo

Cast:

Kuwabatake Sanjurō: Mifune Toshirō

Unosuke: Nakadai Tatsuya

Nui: Tsukasa Yōko

Orin: Yamada Isuzu

Inokichi: Katō Daisuke

Seibei: Kawazu Seisaburō

Tokuemon: Shimura Takashi

Master Honma: Fujita Susumu

Yojimbo is one of Kurosawa's timeless masterpieces, and arguably among the director's works that best represent his aesthetics, as well as his ethics. It is a film of several contradictions. On the one hand, it is a "traditional" *jidai-geki* (period drama), with samurai, sword fights, and premodern Japanese hairstyles. On the other hand, the film's setting resembles the Wild West as much as feudal Japan, and its script was influenced by the writings of an American writer, Dashiell Hammett, and his story *Red Harvest* (1929). It is therefore not surprising that *Yōjinbō* was adapted into a full-fledged Western, *A Fistful of Dollars*, by Sergio Leone in 1964. Kurosawa's film also showcases much more violence than films in same genre that were released in Japan at the time, yet it is also a comedy, accompanied by cheerful music composed by Satō Masaru. In addition to these somewhat contradictory aspects of the film, there is also the narrative itself, which builds tension toward a climatic clash between two characters who appear at first to be motivated only by greed and selfishness.

The plot revolves around a wandering sword-for-hire (played by the great Mifune Toshirō), who arrives at a remote town that is torn between two competing gangs. Determined to profit from the conflict, he offers his services to one side after demonstrating his skills on its rival. He is immediately hired, and asked to face the town's strongest warrior (played by Nakadai Tatsuya). However, his loyalty to his employers does not last long, and as soon as an opportunity to earn more money comes from the opponents, he changes sides, presumably in effort to attract an even better proposition.

—Rea Amit