

Heroism in a Cynical Age: Tracing the Japanese Search for Communal Cohesion in the Postwar Period via the Samurai Figure in Film

Cameron Chorpenning

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Thesis Advisor: David Atherton – Japanese

Honors Council Representative: Paul Gordon – Humanities

Additional Committee Member: Annjeanette Wiese – Humanities

Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the warrior figure in samurai films of the 1960s as a means of tracing an evolving sense of social order in Japan in this decade, characterized by political and social turbulence resulting from the lingering trauma of World War II, the uncertainty of the Cold War, and the increase of consumerism as the Japanese economy began to accelerate. Through in-depth analysis of three particular films from this decade, *Yojimbō*, *Hara-Kiri*, and *The Sword of Doom*, this paper argues that the pervasive classification of samurai films from the 1960s as cynical, nihilistic, and cruel, while not incorrect, neglects to fully consider the role of the samurai figure as holding together the social order in a moral capacity. Each film's protagonist is a unique reimagining of the samurai, and each accomplishes this task differently and with varying degrees of efficacy, representing the manner in which a sense of communal cohesion was envisioned over the course of the 1960s. As the decade progressed, the cynicism in these films grew more pronounced and the hope of achieving a healthy, moral social order embodied in samurai protagonists became more oblique and overall less attainable, though never entirely impossible.

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Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, the Japanese death toll numbered around 2.5 million including both soldiers and civilians, the result of a crippling defeat and the catastrophic atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the words of historian Andrew Gordon, this trauma gave way to “a deeply felt revulsion toward all wars among millions of Japanese people.”¹ In the ensuing occupation of Japan by Allied Forces, the occupiers drafted for the country a new constitution, which included the provision that Japan was to relinquish the right to wage “war as a sovereign right of the nation.”² Overall, the Japanese public received the new constitution enthusiastically, suggesting, indeed, a desire to place war and militarism behind them.³

While such history is useful for the understanding of this paper’s subject matter, it is not its ultimate concern. Instead, this paper seeks to investigate the samurai figure in film, a very specific segment of Japanese culture in the postwar period with a complex history. Such an inquiry raises numerous questions pertaining to how a nation such as Japan processes such a devastating defeat and so abrupt a shift from total war to peace, as well as the necessary reformation of identity thereafter. Cinema is a particularly productive medium to investigate in this regard, as there is a kind of democracy to it. Whereas high literature and art were not necessarily within the ambit of most Japanese people during the postwar period, the 1950s saw a boom in film production and, though production slowed during the 1960s, Japanese cinema audiences continued to grow.⁴ Therefore, as a means of

¹ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 223.

² Justin Jesty, “Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage & Grief,” *MIT*, 2012, https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/tokyo_1960/anp2_essay02.html.

³ Gordon, 229.

⁴ Lisa Lackney, “From Nostalgia to Cruelty: Changing Stories of Love, Violence, and Masculinity in Postwar Japanese Samurai Films” (master’s thesis, University of Akron, 2010), 4-5.

tracing the cultural reprocessing of a sense of communal cohesion, cinema is valuable, as it is one of the art forms with which average Japanese people most frequently engaged. Overall, English-language scholarship on the samurai film genre is somewhat lacking, and in particular, discussions of the warrior figure itself in postwar film as it relates to previous concepts of the warrior and grapples with notions of postwar identity are quite limited. In her book, *A New History of Japanese Cinema* Isolde Standish notes, “*jidaigeki* films [period films, the genre to which samurai films belong] have functioned as one of the few popular forums for the re-processing of history as a vehicle for the redefinition of what constitutes Japanese national identity,” though her discussion does not extend much further and does not interrogate the warrior figure at length.⁵ This paper will deal specifically with films from the 1960s, as this period is often regarded as distinct in terms of its *jidaigeki* and the genre’s protagonists, many of whom are samurai. According to Standish, *jidaigeki* films are generally considered in Japanese historiography to be characterized in this decade by their cynicism, and she refers to them as “cruel *jidaigeki*” accordingly.⁶ These films were created at a time when Japanese society was in a state of flux, as the “economic miracle” that would last until nearly the end of the 20th century began and brought with it an increase in consumerism, and conservatism proved still to be a potent force in Japanese politics, particularly in the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (Anpo) between the US and Japan in 1960. The treaty’s opponents saw it as a threat to the ideals of peace and democracy that had been the lofty goals of the Occupation as it threatened to involve Japan in the Cold War on the side of the US when the majority of the population favored neutrality. In 1960, as the treaty was passed by the Japanese government and

⁵ Isolde Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 291.

⁶ Standish, 287.

eventually signed, massive protests erupted, involving millions of students, women, and workers—members of all sectors of society. It was widely viewed, as the progressive intellectual Tsurumi Shunsuke stated, as “nothing less than a battle between two nations: that of prewar and that of postwar Japan.”⁷

It was within this political and social climate in the 1960s that films of the *jidaigeki* genre turned to topics and characters that were far more cynical than those of the decade prior, which were largely nostalgic and “allowed viewers to connect with the triumphs of the Japanese past while overlooking the failures of militarism and war.”⁸ The primary question this paper seeks to answer has to do with why, in the wake of pervasive militarism and a truly costly and traumatic war, the warrior remained such a prominent and popular figure in Japanese cinema, particularly amidst concerns of the resurgence of militarism and conservatism and the troubling possibility of Japan becoming embroiled in yet another conflict should the Cold War become hot. Certainly there were those, particularly on Japan’s political left, who acknowledged a sinister aspect of the samurai as a symbol of militarism and of supposed Japanese ethnic and cultural superiority.⁹ However, this apprehension was not strong or widespread enough to prevent samurai films from becoming tremendously successful, even to the point that the samurai is now one of the most iconic figures of Japanese cinema globally.

⁷ Jesty, “Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage & Grief.”

Jesty also notes that the manner in which the government passed the Anpo treaty shook many Japanese people’s faith in the strength of their democracy, as Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke (who had been imprisoned as a suspect of war crimes during the Occupation) used what many considered to be objectionable strategies in passing the treaty, such as the forcible removal of members of opposition parties from the Diet prior to a vote on the Treaty, allowing it to pass with ease.

⁸ Lackney, 16.

⁹ Karl Friday, “Bushidō or Bull? A Medieval Historian’s Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition,” *The History Teacher*, 27, no. 3 (1994) : 339.

A potential answer to the question of why the samurai achieved such a status in film lies in that the creators of samurai films were involved in a process not entirely unlike that of other modern and early modern writers, intellectuals, and propagandists who preceded them: the reinvention of the idea of the warrior to address the demands of their particular era. The samurai films discussed in this paper were produced at a time when Japan's social order was again called into question, still coping not only with the devastating defeat at the hands of the Allies, as well as efforts by Occupation forces to reshape Japanese culture through their process of "demilitarization and democratization," but also with the possibility embodied by the Anpo treaty that these peaceful ideals were unattainable.¹⁰ Additionally, Japan's economic boom prompted criticism from both the political right and left pertaining to what these critics deemed to be the potentially corrosive effects of consumerism upon Japanese people's regard for their political values, irrespective of which end of the political spectrum these fell upon. Gordon cites the liberal thinker Maruyama Masao's assertion that "the pursuit of material desires generated a 'privatized' spirit of 'indifference' that proved 'very convenient for the governing elites who wish to "contain" political activism,"¹¹ a sentiment with particular resonance in the wake of the Anpo protests, which did not achieve their ultimate goal of preventing the signing of the treaty with the US. As Hamaya Hiroshi, a photographer who documented the protests later said of their aftermath, "I thought this was a rare moment of progress. But it was only a passing occurrence . . . Superficial economic progress came after the political strife. But this kind of unstable peace and prosperity, driven by economic development, was false."¹²

¹⁰ Jesty, "Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage and Grief."

¹¹ Gordon, 266.

¹² Jesty, "Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage and Grief."

Thus, with various sources of social turbulence and, in some cases, disillusionment characterizing the 1960s in Japan, I contend the samurai films I will examine function as a means of tracing the transformation of a sense of a social order in this decade that does not entirely reject the warrior, but instead adopts a more nuanced, multi-dimensional view of the figure. In this manner, the samurai becomes a vehicle through which these films can explore issues of individualism, relationships with authority and power structures, and the use of violence—all of which carry particular significance amidst Japan's social and political developments in the 1960s—arriving at very different, if not opposite, conclusions from those who had conceptualized the warrior in the past. Thus, these films are involved simultaneously in deconstructing and reclaiming the warrior, its incarnations both in propaganda and in nostalgic 1950s *jidaigeki* defeated, now ripe for reconstruction in the 1960s. In this process of remaking the warrior figure, the social order itself is reimagined. Moreover, it is for this reason that the samurai films of this decade and their warrior protagonists can be understood more deeply than simply as representatives of the cynical trends in *jidaigeki* at this time. Instead, the role of the samurai protagonists in the particular films this paper will investigate is, in part, to hold together order at a moral level. The manner in which they do so and their efficacy in this task communicate how notions of communal cohesion and a new social order evolved over the course of the 1960s.

However, it is necessary first to illustrate the process by which the warrior has been reinvented over time, a process in which filmmakers certainly took part. I will begin with a discussion of how the figure manifested during Japan's early modern era, also referred to as the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). In this period, the Tokugawa Shogunate, a new dynasty of military rulers, had consolidated power and ended the centuries of violent

conflict between feudal lords preceding it. During the Tokugawa period, samurai were a warrior class existing in peacetime, more frequently acting as bureaucrats than fighters. It was in this environment that certain samurai thinkers began to define what they determined to be the ideal ethic and role for their class in an age of peace.¹³ As Karl Friday explains in his essay “*Bushidō* or Bull?,” however, the concept of a samurai ethos was hazy and relatively undefined in both the medieval period and Japan’s early modern period.¹⁴ Therefore, in their efforts to outline the warrior ideal, the samurai writing on the concept were not inheriting an ancient, unbroken tradition. Instead, they sought to reshape the conceptualization of the warrior to meet the demands of their time—in which the warrior’s role was fundamentally changed—often with differing conclusions.

This notion of a samurai ethos may also be referred to in this case as *bushidō*—a term I aim to problematize in this portion of the paper—which translates literally as “the way of the warrior.” Though the term *bushidō* did appear at times during the Tokugawa period, its use was so uncommon that Nitobe Inazō, who authored *Bushidō: the Soul of Japan* in 1899, was convinced that he had created the term personally.¹⁵ However, ever since Nitobe used the word *bushidō* to refer to a warrior ethic, it has become firmly associated, often erroneously, with many modern popular discourses concerning the samurai. Furthermore, the term is frequently associated with the incorrect assumption that a consistent code endured throughout the warrior class’s existence in Japan.

In fact, the writings of samurai in the early modern period in search of a warrior ethos have very little to do with the behavior of the warrior class and its realities during

¹³ Friday, 340.

¹⁴ Friday, 344.

¹⁵ Friday, 340.

the previous period of Japanese history, when the country was incessantly at war with itself—that is, when the samurai were actually operating as active warriors.¹⁶ It is for this reason that writings such as those by Yamamoto Tsunetomo, who argued that “the way of the warrior is to die” in *Hagakure*, his early eighteenth century treatise on ideal samurai ethics, must be viewed within their historical context.¹⁷ The result of such consideration of these texts is an understanding that they are involved in a process of reinventing the warrior for their own age, not carrying on a fundamentally unchanged samurai tradition and ethos. After all, the majority of Tsunetomo’s samurai contemporaries were not likely to be called upon to perform life-threatening duties in peacetime, and yet the vision of the warrior he presents is intimately linked with mortality.

Moreover, modern conceptions of *bushidō*, such as that which Nitobe espoused, are incompatible with those of Tokugawa period samurai writing on the subject, just as these authors’ writings are inconsistent with the realities of their more warlike predecessors. One vital component of this disconnect is the dimension of social class. The title of Nitobe’s book, *Bushidō: the Soul of Japan*, published three decades after the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate, in the modernizing years of the Meiji Period, contains within it the work’s central assertion: the spirit of the samurai is the spirit of all Japanese people; samurai values are Japanese values. As Friday explains, though the Tokugawa samurai who wrote on the topic of an ethos for the warrior class often maintained differing beliefs on the matter, one point at which these beliefs converged was that the warrior class was just that: an elite whose adherence to a particular ethic ought to differentiate them from the other

¹⁶ Friday, 340.

¹⁷ Friday, 341.

members of their society.¹⁸ Hence, when Nitobe claimed that the Japanese essence itself, shared by all members of the modern nation, was involved intimately with *bushidō*, he re-appropriated and reconstructed the concept of the warrior to suit the requirements of his time, when the Japanese nation-state was young and in search of an identity as it emerged upon the world stage.¹⁹ In doing so, Nitobe engaged in the same process of reinventing the warrior as the samurai writing on the warrior ethos two or three centuries earlier had done.

This trend of reconstructing the warrior persisted in wartime propaganda, which perpetuated the notion that *bushidō* was a uniquely and fundamentally Japanese quality, and that Japanese soldiers, conscripts from a range of socioeconomic classes, were the heirs and defenders of an ideology that had previously been conceived as unique to a particular class. David C. Earhart provides a useful characterization of the warrior figure in Japan during the war in his book *Certain Victory: Images of World War II in the Japanese Media*. Earhart defines this image as that of a “noble warrior engaged in a holy war.”²⁰ He was not only an extremely potent force on the battlefield, but also an exemplar, “the prototypical citizen in Japan at war . . . expected to embody the highest ideals of the nation.”²¹ This warrior was courageous, supremely loyal to emperor and country, and, perhaps most importantly, willing to sacrifice everything for the fulfillment of the aims of

¹⁸ Friday, 342-3.

¹⁹ Following the Meiji Restoration, which restored political power to the emperor in 1867-68, Japan made efforts to modernize in some respects in hopes of achieving international legitimacy and preventing its colonization by one or more Western powers.

²⁰ David C. Earhart, *Certain Victory: Images of World War II in the Japanese Media* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 69.

Earhart does not cite a Japanese word or phrase to correspond with “noble warrior,” suggesting that the phrase is his own. He does, however, translate “holy war” from the Japanese *seisen*, which did appear in propaganda. This paper will use the term “noble warrior” to refer to the idealized version of the warrior that appeared in wartime propaganda.

²¹ Earhart, 103.

the “holy war” in which he fought. Moreover, he was frequently likened to the samurai, at times with explicit references to *bushidō*, and at others only slightly more implicitly, as in certain cases when Japanese soldiers are referred to as *bushi*, warriors, not the typical modern term for soldier, *heitai*. Throughout Japan’s history, the term *bushi* specifically denoted samurai, as they were the warrior class.²² Therefore, in these cases the language used to refer to these soldiers appears to have been specifically chosen in order to associate them with the samurai tradition—or the propagandist’s version thereof. Japanese soldiers are represented as “inheritor[s] and guardian[s] of the samurai ethos . . . embod[y]ing the noble traditions of his spiritual forbears,” the samurai.²³ However, as the apparent disconnect between medieval, early modern, and modern conceptions of the samurai and *bushidō* demonstrates, this warrior “tradition” is contested.

Even in notions of the warrior’s loyalty, which were central to both the writings of Tokugawa period samurai thinkers and wartime propaganda, a significant rift exists. As Friday explains, “the abstract, transcendent loyalty to the emperor . . . demanded of Japanese subjects by modern *bushidō* was a far cry from the particularized, feudal loyalty valued by Tsunetomo and his contemporaries.”²⁴ All employed samurai served a local lord, and according to the writings on samurai ethics from the Tokugawa period, it was with this lord that supreme loyalty ought to lie.²⁵ Once again, the process is illustrated here of each generation remaking the warrior in such a way as to meet its own needs. Therefore, the

²² Earhart, 94-6.

²³ Earhart, 96.

²⁴ Friday, 343.

²⁵ Friday also notes that such supreme devotion to one’s lord as was advocated by the samurai thinkers of the Tokugawa period is inconsistent not only with later, more abstract notions of loyalty to the emperor, but also with samurai behavior in the medieval period. In this time, the lord-vassal relationship was contractual and based upon mutual benefit, not necessarily a deep sense of devotion. As a result, Friday explains, defection was a factor in many significant battles throughout medieval Japanese history, frequently occurring in the midst of the fighting.

samurai figure can be interpreted as malleable, a construct pragmatically assembled within various particular historical contexts.

This same process of reinvention can be observed in film following the war as well: in the 1950s the samurai film was frequently deeply nostalgic, with an emphasis upon prewar values and concepts of a traditional Japan unsullied by the trauma of the war. Standish cites Tsutsui Kiyotada as describing these films as “a ‘lifestyle model’ for Japanese people in times of rapid social and economic change by providing, through nostalgic images, the essences of a past ‘Japaneseness.’”²⁶ The warrior underwent yet another transformation in the 1960s, in which tradition and nostalgia were eschewed in favor of a cynicism that resonated with audiences for whom the Occupation’s promise of a more peaceful, more democratic future was beginning to seem less and less plausible.

This paper will closely investigate three films in particular: *Yojimbō* (1961), *Hara-Kiri* (1962), and *The Sword of Doom* (*Daibosatsu Tōge* 1966). I have selected these films because each is representative of a distinct interpretation of the figure of the samurai: as the savior, the rebel, and the villain respectively, with each character type serving to address the aforementioned issues of individualism, relationships with structures of authority, and the use of violence from different angles. Furthermore, I will discuss the films in chronological order, as they are listed above. Though each has its cynical, nihilistic elements, consistent with the classification of 1960s *jidaigeki* as “cruel,” these qualities are present in varying degrees, and become more pronounced over time, with *Yojimbō*, released in 1961, being arguably the least cynical and *The Sword of Doom*, released in 1966, representing the other end of the spectrum as the most nihilistic of the three films. In some

²⁶ Standish, 275.

fashion, each film's protagonist is involved with maintaining order on a moral level, yet as the films become more cynical, so too does this prospect become more abstract and ultimately less optimistic in each of them. However, the fact that such moral undercurrents are identifiable at all suggests that a characterization of 1960s *jidaigeki* as simply and uniformly nihilistic or "cruel" does not take into account the nuance present in the genre at this time. Therefore, this paper seeks to more fully investigate this nuance and examine the manner in which it informs an understanding of Japan's reprocessing of its sense of social order and communal unity in the postwar period via cinematic reimaginings of the samurai figure.

Chapter One: *Yojimbō* and the Samurai as Savior

With the beginning of the 1960s, the genre of *jidaigeki* is said to have undergone a significant shift, one that emphasized violence and cruelty, and in which cynicism was nearly omnipresent. Isolde Standish refers to such films as “cruel-*jidaigeki*” and states the idea, supported by other scholars, that this era began with the release of Kurosawa Akira’s *Yojimbō* in 1961.²⁷ *Yojimbō* was a highly influential film—according to Donald Richie, Kurosawa’s most popular—and it follows that such a towering work would usher in a new age of *jidaigeki*.²⁸ For such an influential film, *Yojimbō*’s plot is rather straightforward. A wandering, unemployed samurai (Mifune Toshirō), known as a *rōnin*, comes across a town in the midst of a crisis. Two warring gang factions have essentially shut the town down with their conflict. Nobody but the casket-maker is making any money, and the town has become overrun by thugs hired to fight for one faction or the other. The samurai, who calls himself Sanjūrō (a pseudonym), decides to use his wiles to play the two sides off of each other in such a way that both are destroyed and the conflict is ended. To do so, he offers his services as a bodyguard to one side, convincing them of his worth through a display of martial skill, but continually switches allegiances, all the while sabotaging each faction from within and intensifying the conflict between them. However, Unosuke, the clever younger brother of one of the gangs’ leaders, discovers the samurai’s plot in the process. Sanjūrō is captured and beaten, but eventually escapes and recovers enough to launch a final attack

²⁷ Standish, 287.

²⁸ Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 155.

against the remaining thugs. Having defeated all his foes and liberated the town, Sanjūrō quickly departs, leaving the town to rebuild.²⁹

A number of scholars contend that in *Yojimbō*, though he does rid the town of its gangster problem, the protagonist is not genuinely heroic. Standish claims that he “intervenes in the town politics, not out of any altruistic sense of restoring justice for the commoners but because the situation ‘seems interesting.’”³⁰ Similarly, in his book *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* Richie asserts that Sanjūrō “is naturally bad, just as the townspeople are naturally bad . . . For reasons entirely non-moral . . . he decides to help the bad destroy each other. This accomplished, still unmoved, by no means a samaritan, without a civic thought in his animal-head, he can walk away.”³¹ These assertions would seem to support the notion that *Yojimbō* is indeed largely responsible for the advent of the cruel-*jidaigeki* of the 1960s. Though I will not dispute that there are decidedly cynical and dark aspects of *Yojimbō*, nor the notion that it was a catalyst for this shift in the genre, the claim that Sanjūrō is not truly a hero, that he is lacking a sense of morality, is untenable. There is much more evidence for the contrary within the film and also from Kurosawa himself. In his chapter on *Yojimbō* in *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, Richie includes an illuminating quotation from the director, one that seems to contradict the very stance Richie takes on the film’s protagonist. Kurosawa explains:

The idea is about rivalry on both sides, and both sides are equally bad. We all know what that is like. Here we are, weakly caught in the middle, and it is impossible to choose between evils. Myself, I’ve always wanted to somehow or other stop these senseless battles of bad against bad, but we’re all more or less weak—I’ve never been able to. And that is why the hero of this picture is

²⁹ If this story seems familiar, it is because *Yojimbō*’s plot is the same as Sergio Leone’s *A Fistfull of Dollars*, which is a direct remake of Kurosawa’s film.

³⁰ Standish, 288.

³¹ Richie, 149.

different from us. He is able to stand squarely in the middle, and stop the fight.³²

Kurosawa clearly outlines here the duty and the capability of the hero to defend the weak, to right the wrongs and defeat the evils that ordinary people are unable to. This chapter will argue that Sanjūrō is indeed a hero on a moral mission and, significantly, one incarnated in the figure of the samurai. The warrior as imagined in *Yojimbō* is unique, and quite a significant departure from the image perpetuated by the propaganda common during the war, as well as by other modern thinkers such as Nitobe Inazō. Although in Sanjūrō the notions of the warrior as a savior and as an exceptional member of society—both part of the warrior image that existed prior—persist, Sanjūrō is unfettered by the ideologies ascribed to past imaginings of the warrior. This freedom from dogma affords Sanjūrō greater agency as a samurai, which in turn enables his more pragmatic, non-traditional approach as the redeemer of the community he finds himself drawn into. The combination of these elements results in a figure that presents an optimistic view of the individual's potential for good done on behalf of the community, and who rectifies society's ills with an approach both practical and heroic. For these reasons the samurai figure was still able to find resonance with Japanese audiences amid the turbulence of the early 1960s, when many moviegoers were perhaps especially welcoming of the idea of a hero equipped not with a rigid ideology, but with an almost miraculous ability to restore societal balance by forcing evil to devour itself, as well as the moral fortitude to support this capability.

An Upside-Down World

The community in *Yojimbō* functions as a stand-in for society gone completely wrong, one desperately in need of saving. Only a few minutes into the film, Kurosawa

³² Richie, 147.

begins illustrating the moral decay that will pervade much of the rest of the film. Prior to entering the town, Sanjūrō comes across a father and son arguing bitterly. The son wants to leave home to go join the conflict between the two gangs in town, hoping to profit by fighting for one side or the other. When his father protests that he'll be killed, the son cries, "A long life eating gruel—to hell with that! I want good food and nice clothes. I'm gonna live it up and die young!"³³ He then runs off, at which point the father scurries back into his home to admonish his wife for allowing their son to leave. The theme inescapable throughout *Yojimbō* of greed and self-interest leading to the disintegration of society is introduced for the first time in this scene. Just as the son's fixation upon personal gain results in the breakdown of his own family unit, the avarice pervasive within the nearby town is taking the community down a path to destruction.

The sorry state of this community is fully realized upon Sanjūrō's entry into it. What is perhaps most immediately noticeable about the town is its emptiness. The only faces we see at first are those of thugs and prostitutes peering out of their windows suspiciously to catch a glimpse of the newcomer. There are no townspeople to be seen going about their business, with the exception of Hansuke, the town's constable, ostensibly the representative of law and order, who cautiously emerges from his home to inform Sanjūrō of the conflict and the opportunity for profit it presents to someone willing to fight, as well as requesting he be paid a fee for the information. Aside from Hansuke, the only other non-threatening townspeople introduced early in the film are the equally profit-minded casket maker and Gonji, the old man who runs the now empty restaurant. All of them, along with presumably the rest of the town's population, keep themselves invisible, remaining in

³³ *Yojimbō*, 0:04:17 directed by Kurosawa Akira (1961; Tokyo: Toho, 1999), DVD.

hiding while thugs run the streets, boasting of their many past offenses and time in prison.³⁴ These men are a series of grotesques, covered in tattoos, with rough features—a giant even stands among their ranks. Such are the monstrous men who have replaced the town's normal inhabitants. Moreover, the town has two men claiming to be mayor, one siding with Ushitora, and one with Seibei, each the leader of a different gang. Each of these elements is a result of the moral decay in the town precipitated by Ushitora and Seibei's greed and anger, and indicates a society that is completely backwards to the point of being ridiculous, and at times comical. A community in a situation so dismal is clearly in need of redemption—precisely what Sanjūrō offers.

From his first appearance in the film, it is clear what kind of warrior Sanjūrō is. We see he carries two swords, a privilege reserved for the samurai class, and is thus identifiable as a member of the warrior aristocracy. Furthermore, his robes bear the five crests characteristic of samurai clothing, which more firmly solidifies not only his class, but also that he was, presumably until recently, employed. *Yojimbō* is set in the *bakumatsu* period (1853-1867), the last years of feudalism in Japan following the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy upon Japan's shore and the subsequent opening of the country to Western powers.³⁵ At this time, the Tokugawa Shogunate was failing, the old order disintegrating. Hence, it is highly plausible that we as the audience are meant to assume Sanjūrō has recently been dispossessed by this turbulence as his lord's house has likely been dissolved for one reason or another. The beginning of the film finds him wandering aimlessly, tossing a stick into the air and going in

³⁴ *Yojimbō*, 0:09:34.

³⁵ Prior to Perry's arrival, Japan had maintained an isolationist policy known as *sakoku*, which prohibited most foreigners from entering the country.

the direction it points. He appears not to be bound to or by anything in particular—not to a lord, employment, or even a plan. Therefore, he is immediately characterized as a wanderer, the lone swordsman that has become such a popular contemporary image of the samurai. More importantly, this characterization marks him as an outsider, one who, as Kurosawa says, is indeed different from ordinary people. Sanjūrō is a mysterious man with an equally mysterious aptitude for heroics.

Let us also investigate more closely what it is that truly characterizes Sanjūrō as a moral hero and redeemer within the film, rather than an opportunistic *rōnin* looking to make some money. Perhaps the most unambiguous illustration of his intentions comes very near the film’s beginning, when he explains to Gonji, the old man, why he has decided not to heed Gonji’s advice and continue on his way, leaving the town far behind. Sanjūrō explains, partially to himself, “I’ll get paid for killing. And this town is full of men who deserve to die . . . with them gone, the town could have a fresh start.”³⁶ It is the first part of this quotation, that about getting paid as a bodyguard for one side or the other, that seems to have led scholars such as Standish and Richie to assume that Sanjūrō’s motives in saving the town are not ultimately altruistic. However, the rest of this quotation includes much stronger evidence for the contrary. Sanjūrō makes a morally based evaluation of the men he is up against. They “deserve to die,” he says, implying that by killing them, he is not merely looking for easy money, but attempting to right some moral wrong. Furthermore, he makes the claim that the town would be better off with them gone, that his success would allow a “fresh start.” If Sanjūrō is truly only undertaking the task of battling these gangs on a whim, for either money or just because it seems interesting, as Standish and

³⁶ *Yojimbō*, 0:15:45.

Richie claim, why does he treat this issue as a moral one, and why is he concerned at all with what the end result will be for the town? The answer I propose is that ultimately, his motive is to redeem this community, and that he accepts the task altruistically.

The Warrior Trickster

Sanjūrō undertakes an endeavor with moral aims at least superficially akin, for instance, to the notion of the “holy war” waged by the “noble warrior” of propaganda in that his cause is presumed to be righteous. As the “holy war” was to liberate Asia and deliver them from the corrupting influences of the West, so is Sanjūrō’s purpose to redeem from evil the community he finds himself in. Therefore, in him at least some aspect of the warrior from a previous iteration remains, that which broadly categorizes the figure as heroic and virtuous. Additionally, he possesses one other notable characteristic that likens him to some extent to the warrior image of the past, but ultimately manifests quite differently. Sanjūrō, like the “noble warrior,” or the vision of the samurai espoused by Nitobe, is an exceptional member of society. His skills and attributes differentiate him from the average people that populate his world. In past imaginings of the warrior, these were such traits as martial skill, moral purity, valor, loyalty, and a capacity for self-sacrifice. Sanjūrō is indeed a highly skilled warrior—this is why each side of the conflict is so eager to hire him—and he is certainly equipped with his own sort of moral compass. However, what makes him so exceptional in this film and so uniquely equipped to save the town are his powers of perception and his cunning. Throughout *Yojimbo* Sanjūrō resorts to trickery to achieve his aims; his entire scheme depends upon it. He approaches the situation quite pragmatically, recognizing his inability to resolve it solely through force, and so determining the most effective strategy to be to manipulate both sides into destroying one

another. The warrior is presented here as a cunning trickster, an interpretation of the figure that stands in stark contrast to earlier modern conceptions of the warrior, to whom, Nitobe writes, “Nothing is more loathsome . . . than underhand dealings or crooked undertakings.”³⁷ Moreover, the ideal warrior’s actions were largely concerned with great, performative displays of valor and sacrifice. The warrior ideal in propaganda (not to mention in the writings of Tokugawa samurai such as Yamamoto Tsunetomo discussed in the introduction) involved an intimacy with death, a willingness and, at times, eagerness to die for one’s cause, lord, or emperor. Such an attitude toward mortality does not exist in Sanjūrō. His aim is to find the most efficient means of redeeming the town and utilize them. Hence, because he is not restrained by any kind of dogmatic notion of what it means to be a warrior, he is free to take this route.

Kurosawa establishes Sanjūrō’s unique ability to perceive the world around him, that which enables him to effectively manipulate his enemies and sets him apart as an exceptional individual, very early on. In the scene at the beginning of the film involving the argument between the father and son, which ends in the son running away from home to try and make some money in the town’s conflict, the father chastises his wife for doing nothing to stop their son. In the ensuing argument, the couple provides a significant portion of the exposition for the film’s central conflict, explaining everything in the town that has gone wrong.³⁸ Sanjūrō, though not a part of the conversation, is clearly aware of it, which Kurosawa illustrates in a telling shot (Fig. 1). The shot foregrounds the husband and wife, placing Sanjūrō in the background between the couple. The very deliberate placement

³⁷ Nitobe Inazō, *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan* (Tokyo: Teibi, 1908), 20.

³⁸ *Yojimbō*, 0:04:35.



Fig. 1: Sanjūrō listens keenly to the argument between this husband and wife living on the outskirts of town, which reveals to him that the town is in the midst of a crisis. This shot in particular establishes Sanjūrō as a highly perceptive and clever hero, always listening and thinking, even when he appears not to be.

of the characters within the shot communicates to the audience the nature of Sanjūrō's skills of perception. Even when those around him are unaware of it—and perhaps especially in this case—the samurai is always listening, constantly taking in and processing his surroundings, forever a step ahead of everyone else. The early establishment of this aspect of Sanjūrō's character provides the basis for its employment throughout the film as a means of taking advantage of his enemies and ultimately ridding the town of their evil.

The shot of the husband and wife with Sanjūrō in the background is mirrored some time later in the film, at the point at which Sanjūrō's plan is truly beginning to take shape, when his actions first instigate conflict between the two gangs. To set his plan in motion Sanjūrō gets himself hired to fight for Seibei, Ushitora's enemy. After securing a generous offer for his services, Sanjūrō discovers that Seibei intends to have him killed once the fight—which, emboldened by the addition of the samurai to his force, Seibei has decided will occur that day at noon—is won. When all the men of either faction have lined up in the street for what is presumably the final showdown, Sanjūrō abandons Seibei, dropping his



Fig. 2: Sanjūrō watches as Ushitora and Seibei face off. The gangsters take no notice of him, which parallels their obliviousness to his scheme to bring about their downfall.

coins in the dust. He then struts confidently over to Ushitora, informs him that he no longer works for Seibei, and then just as quickly walks away, climbing the watchtower in the center of town to watch the fight. Each side advances, and then retreats, again and again, eliciting grins and chuckles from the samurai spectating upon the comical display of his own making.³⁹ The fight, which never actually begins, is cut short when a messenger arrives with news of the impending visit of an inspector from Edo, the Shogunate's capital. At this point comes a shot that communicates precisely Sanjūrō's strategy in this conflict (Fig. 2). Perched atop the watchtower, the samurai is, as in the shot in which he listens to the arguing couple, placed in the background—though this time he is not even in focus. Instead, Ushitora and Seibei are foregrounded, staring each other down, vowing that their business is not yet finished. In this exchange neither man notices Sanjūrō. They are too blinded by their rage and aggression to see anything but each other. This single shot communicates the basis of Sanjūrō's strategy: to take advantage of these men's immoralities, their greed, their wrath, and the shortsightedness these create to manipulate

³⁹ *Yojimbō*, 0:29:57.

and defeat them, all without their knowing. The samurai's elevation in this shot even gives him the quality of a sort of puppet master, further highlighting his role as an exceptional figure, one who possesses the skills necessary to serve as the town's savior.

Dark Reflections of the Warrior

Sanjūrō is able to accomplish what he does in large part because his abilities are unlike those of any other person in town—he is the most intelligent, perceptive, and adept at fighting of anyone, and is thus unique. However, there are two particular characters, Honma, the samurai who works for Seibei, and Ushitora's younger brother, Unosuke, in *Yojimbō* that bear enough similarities to Sanjūrō to invite comparison, but also a number of striking differences.

Of these two characters, the first the audience is introduced to is Honma. After Sanjūrō initially agrees to be Seibei's bodyguard, striking a deal for 50 *ryō*, the gangster introduces the samurai to his men, one of whom appears to be of the warrior class himself. Honma wears clothing that looks almost identical to Sanjūrō's, a robe with five crests, and carries two swords. Visually, he mirrors the hero, but his behavior reveals that he is a very different sort of warrior. When he first enters the scene, Honma sits on the opposite side of the room from Sanjūrō, looking at the wall and refusing to make eye contact with Seibei or the other samurai. He resentfully claims that Sanjūrō is "in another class" than himself, complaining that he is only receiving two *ryō* to Sanjūrō's 50.⁴⁰ When Seibei announces his plans to launch an attack that day at noon and assembles his men, Sanjūrō notices Honma escaping over the back fence. The fleeing samurai shoots Sanjūrō a grin and waves before

⁴⁰ *Yojimbō*, 0:24:45.

scurrying down the road away from town.⁴¹ Honma is characterized quite simply as a samurai whose only aim is profit. He is very concerned with his rate of pay, and when the danger of conflict becomes real, he runs off shamelessly. He has no ostensible cause or sense of morality; he will simply work for whoever pays him—even if that person is a gangster. Just like nearly every other person in town, though, Honma has no loyalty to anyone or anything other than himself.

Honma serves as a sort of model for what the samurai is expected to be within this community, the kind of warrior they expect Sanjūrō to be—one motivated primarily by self-interest. Sanjūrō cleverly plays directly into this expectation, as throughout nearly the entire film he frequently changes allegiances, manipulates each side into trying to buy him, and haggles ruthlessly when offered a price for his services. In doing so, he keeps his true motive, that which has its basis in communal good, hidden from his enemies, instead putting on a performance that has everything to do with money and personal gain, and convincing everyone in the town—even, for a time, Gonji, the old man he befriends—that he is only in it for himself. This is the expectation in a town such as this one that has become entirely morally bankrupt. In this environment, Sanjūrō cannot afford to stand out, and so he adopts a façade of unrepentant self-interest in order for his plan to succeed. Here, also, emerge common threads between Sanjūrō and past representations of the warrior. Like the notion of the warrior espoused by numerous writers in the Tokugawa period, that of Nitobe's *Bushidō*, and also of wartime propaganda, Sanjūrō demonstrates his great loyalty, albeit in a somewhat roundabout fashion. Though he appears to be loyal to nothing

⁴¹ *Yojimbō*, 0:27:10.

but money, in fact, he faithfully serves a larger sense of social order and communal well-being.

Whereas Honma is a somewhat objectionable but ultimately harmless character, Unosuke, arguably the film's chief antagonist, poses a genuine threat to Sanjūrō and his mission. Unosuke acts as something of a perverted version of Sanjūrō in that the two share certain attributes, namely their intelligence, perceptiveness, and ability to utilize violence. However, Unosuke and Sanjūrō are separated primarily by their vastly different approaches to violence, both in their attitudes to it—Sanjūrō is often stoic while fighting, while Unosuke frequently appears to take pleasure in acts of violence—and in their chosen weapons. The similarities between the two characters are what make Unosuke a real threat to Sanjūrō; however, their differences are what define Sanjūrō as a moral hero and validate the characterization of a samurai figure as such.

Among the townspeople and thugs, Sanjūrō is entirely unique in his skills of perception and his intellect, which are what ultimately allow him to carry out his plan, until Unosuke's arrival in town. Like Sanjūrō, Unosuke has a broader awareness of the world—we are told he has been traveling around the country for a year—which differentiates him from the average resident of the town, affording him an air of authority and intelligence as it does for Sanjūrō.⁴² This appearance of intellect is not without basis, however. Of all the people in the town, Unosuke is the only one who is ever suspicious of Sanjūrō and his motives, and it is he who eventually discovers the samurai's duplicity. Whereas Sanjūrō's trickery is effective against Seibei, Ushitora, and their men, Unosuke cannot be so easily

⁴² *Yojimbō*, 0:45:24.

fooled. In him Sanjūrō has met his match to some extent—like the samurai, his intelligence makes him a formidable opponent.

However, Unosuke and Sanjūrō's similarities end with their shared mental capabilities. The rifts between the two men are concerned primarily with their use of violence, and with the different tools and attitudes each employs for this purpose. The clearest difference in how the men fight is their choice of weaponry: as a samurai Sanjūrō wields a sword, while Unosuke's weapon of choice is a pistol obtained during his travels. Each weapon communicates a distinct message about its owner. Whereas the sword demands that its wielder be face to face with his victim, participating intimately in the experience of killing and of death, the gun allows for detachment, distance, even a less deliberate approach to killing. Sanjūrō, though he has no qualms about killing those he deems deserving of death, does so quite deliberately, with purpose. On the other hand, with his pistol Unosuke is able to dispatch enemies from afar, to kill on a whim. His weapon is indicative of a usage of violence in which the wielder is more divorced from the act of killing than one carrying a sword. For him, killing need not involve much thought or purpose; Unosuke merely has to pull the trigger.

Moreover, Unosuke fetishizes his weapon in a way that Sanjūrō does not. The samurai almost never discusses his sword, but Unosuke frequently draws his pistol, flaunting it at nearly every opportunity. In fact, he brings up the gun in his very first line in the film. Hansuke the constable welcomes Unosuke back to the town, but instead of responding with gratitude, he quickly changes the subject, asking, "Want to see something interesting?" then slowly and dramatically draws the pistol from his robes and

demonstrates its use by firing at the watchtower's bell.⁴³ In this and many other instances, Unosuke treats his weapon with fetishism, indicating an attitude toward violence that differs greatly from Sanjūrō's, whose cause, which necessitates the sword, takes precedence over the weapon itself.

Righting the World Turned Upside-Down

The film demonstrates the nature and efficacy of Sanjūrō's mission in perhaps his most heroic scene, around the film's midpoint, in which he rescues a woman taken by Ushitora, the leader of one of the two gangs, as payment for her husband's gambling debts. In doing so, Sanjūrō reunites the woman with her husband and son. Here, Kurosawa treats his audience to one of the film's more emotional moments, and one that is telling of Sanjūrō as a character and of his mission's purpose and effectiveness. The scene's key shot is both visually striking and of symbolic significance (Fig. 3). On the far right stands Sanjūrō, on the left, the family he has just reunited. The characters' arrangement in the shot is perhaps its most symbolic component. The family stands together, a unit once again thanks to Sanjūrō, reminiscent of the family he encounters at the beginning of the film, which is torn apart when the son decides to join the fight in town. Whereas the evil infesting the town caused that family to disintegrate, disrupting the social order, Sanjūrō's reunification of this family symbolizes his mission to restore the social order, an endeavor in which he is slowly succeeding. Moreover, this shot underscores Sanjūrō's role as an outsider figure, one who, as Kurosawa explains, is different from everyone else. The physical gulf between him and the ordinary family here parallels the separation between him and the people of the town, be they victims or perpetrators of the conflict. As Richie explains, Sanjūrō's "role resembles

⁴³ *Yojimbo*, 0:46:02



Fig. 3: Sanjūrō (Mifune Toshirō) pauses briefly as he is struck by the display of gratitude offered by the family he has reunited. Their reunification recalls the family broken apart in the film's beginning when their son runs away to join the gangsters.

that of the god in Greek plays."⁴⁴ Indeed, Sanjūrō is clearly different from the people populating the world he enters, and, like this deity, it is his own brand of *deus ex machina* that delivers them. In this fashion, the effects of Sanjūrō's mission to set right the upside-down world in which he finds himself can be observed taking shape within this single shot.

Furthermore, this interaction between Sanjūrō and the family adds depth to the hero in that his altruism and compassion are on display, despite his efforts to hide them. In the shot pictured in Figure 3, everyone remains frozen for a moment, and then the family drops to the ground, all prostrating themselves before Sanjūrō, who then rushes to them, chastising them for not possessing the good sense to run. This scene is very measured and deliberately paced in such a way as to highlight its emotional undercurrents not only for the family, but also, more subtly, for Sanjūrō. The samurai appears to be caught off guard by the display of profound gratitude the family puts on for him, and is stunned for a moment, seemingly immobilized by the emotional weight of the moment until their abrupt

⁴⁴ Richie, 149.

bow breaks the stillness. Here, the tough warrior façade Sanjūrō has cultivated throughout the film shows a brief crack. This particular scene communicates exactly what kind of hero Sanjūrō is. Though different from everyone else, he is, after all, human. Moreover, he has a moral purpose in cleaning up the town, and demonstrates that his motives in doing so are in no way selfish, or are even born of a single-minded aim to defeat the gangsters. Instead, they are based in a sense of responsibility to the vision of the community embodied in the reunited family: that which is balanced and whole, rooted in mutual support and affection, not perverted by greed and conflict. It is important to note that Sanjūrō gives the family his own money to ensure their survival, and not just a few coins. He hands over everything he has earned as a bodyguard and does so freely, without hesitation. It is also true that he hurls insults and threats at the family in an attempt to make them leave once they begin groveling at his feet, but, as the cliché says: actions speak louder than words, and Sanjūrō's actions here are clearly altruistic—he is a warrior on a moral mission to redeem a community that has been overrun by evil, but also a human being, as evidenced by the contradiction between his harsh words and his compassionate acts.

At the film's end comes a final symbolic liberation: that of Gonji, the old man. Over the course of the film Gonji acts as its voice of moral outrage, the only average person who maintains a firm moral stance and unflinchingly condemns the evil in his community. He assumes this role from his very first introduction, when Sanjūrō, followed by Hansuke the greedy constable, knocks on the door of Gonji's restaurant. At first, Gonji only notices Hansuke, whose utter lack of effectiveness as a lawman has enabled the flourishing of crime. Hansuke is representative of the omnipresent avarice consuming the community, whereas Gonji, who yells at him, "Mind your own business, you bastard!" as his very first

line and slams the door in his face, represents a last bastion of morality in the town, and one that is furious at how backwards things have become.⁴⁵ When Gonji is captured just prior to the film's final confrontation between Sanjūrō and the gangsters, the samurai rushes to the old man's aid, cutting down every remaining man (with the exception of the farmer's son from the beginning of the film, whom Sanjūrō instructs to go home to his mother). Having done so, Sanjūrō says to Gonji, "It'll be quiet in this town now," raises his sword, and cuts through the ropes binding the old man.⁴⁶ Here Sanjūrō's literal freeing of Gonji is symbolic of his liberation of the town as a whole and of the rectification he brings it. In reassuring Gonji that the conflict has ended, Sanjūrō allows the old man—the film's voice of moral outrage—to rest easy, to let his vehemence subside. For the first time, Gonji is speechless. Thus, we can observe Sanjūrō's success as a savior encapsulated within this single interaction, which represents the restoration of moral balance to the community.

Conclusions

Yojimbō may well have marked the beginning of a new crueler, darker period for the *jidaigeki* film genre; however, these characteristics do not necessarily apply in this film to the figure of the warrior himself. Kurosawa, when discussing his own theories as to why the film was so successful, has said,

The other companies all insisted that it was because of the sword-fighting. This isn't so. The reason was the character of the hero and what he does. He is a real hero, and when he fights he has a real reason for fighting and he really does. He doesn't just stand around and wave his sword in the air.⁴⁷

Kurosawa's assessment points to the notion that there is something transcendent about Sanjūrō's character. He is different from everyone around him, in his martial skill, in his

⁴⁵ *Yojimbō*, 0:10:19.

⁴⁶ *Yojimbō*, 1:50:10.

⁴⁷ Richie, 151.

cleverness, and, perhaps most importantly, in his cause. For this reason, a common thread can be found between Sanjūrō and earlier modern conceptualizations of the warrior, that which characterizes these figures as saviors and outstanding individuals. However, Sanjūrō proves himself to be a very different type of hero, one who is unbound by a dogmatic sense of a warrior ethos. In him the warrior is proven to remain heroic, with the capacity for both morality and pragmatism. It is this quality that permits Sanjūrō to be a relevant hero even in the postwar period. His ability to carry out acts of genuine heroism while simultaneously appearing antiheroic is precisely what enables him to speak to what optimism remained in an increasingly cynical period of Japanese history. He has no sermon to preach to the other characters in the film, nor the audience, for an approach rooted in rigid ideology is not what the film's situation, nor that of many beleaguered Japanese people in this decade, demand. Instead, he meets the broken world he seeks to repair on its own terms; immersing himself in the very evil he seeks to destroy in order to do so. In this manner, the samurai hero best suited to assume the role of savior in the *jidaigeki* of the 1960s is one whose heroism is necessarily somewhat disguised, whose sense of morality is rooted not in grand displays of valor or virtue, but rather a desire to restore societal balance by the most efficacious means.

Therefore, though *Yojimbō* does indeed have its cynical elements, such as the complete inefficacy and corruption of the legal structures it portrays, and its inclusion of far more greedy, selfish, and cruel characters than virtuous ones, it ultimately presents a positive vision of the samurai figure in particular. In this film the warrior is the promoter of a sense of social order, the locus around and instrument through which it is achieved.

While an assessment of the *jidaigeki* of the 1960s as cruel is certainly not incorrect, because

the warrior figure takes on such a role, it is difficult to characterize the *jidaigeki* of this decade exclusively as nihilistic, cynical. Instead, it is important to consider the manner in which the samurai figure operates specifically. In *Yojimbō*, though the world around Sanjūrō is on the verge of utter collapse, he maintains order in a moral capacity. In him, audiences in the early 1960s could find a creator of communal cohesion during a time when Japan seemingly lacked such a sense. The warrior here has once again been reinvented to suit the needs of the era, yet maintains the role Nitobe attempted to bestow upon the figure when he declared *bushidō* “the soul of Japan.” Even in the 1960s, the samurai persists as a character around which a sense of collective cohesion can be achieved. In *Yojimbō* the elements of the samurai figure that remain useful in this capacity, specifically altruism and commitment to justice for the powerless, are highlighted and enabled in large part by the absence of other components that had previously been associated with the warrior, namely a strict adherence to inflexible systems of ideology. In Kobayashi Masaki’s film *Hara-Kiri*, the subject of the next chapter, it is not the absence of certain traits that had been closely linked with the samurai that underscores the film’s vision of the warrior ideal. Instead, it is its direct, biting criticism of these attributes that reveals how the samurai figure was required to function in the 1960s in order to continue to serve as a symbol of communal unity.

Chapter Two: *Hara-Kiri* and the Samurai as Rebel

If *Yojimbō* marked the beginning of a new period of crueler, more cynical *jidaigeki*, then Kobayashi Masaki's *Hara-Kiri* is indicative of that trend's more complete realization. Isolde Standish cites *Hara-Kiri* as one of the key *jidaigeki* films of the 1960s in which "the main protagonists fight an isolated battle against a corrupt and ultimately overpowering bureaucratic society . . . doomed to failure by the sheer magnitude of the corruption of society."⁴⁸ Unlike in *Yojimbō*, in which Sanjūrō operates as a sort of extended *deus ex machina* for a community plagued by incessant conflict, in *Hara-Kiri* the samurai does not possess the power as an individual to right all the wrongs of his world. However, the film's central conflict between individual and institution brings into focus the struggle between humanity and ideology, and which of the two the warrior ought to prioritize, which is key in defining the samurai figure in its iteration in the cinema of the 1960s.

The film's protagonist is a *rōnin* named Tsugumo Hanshirō (Nakadai Tatsuya), who arrives at the film's beginning at the Edo residence of the powerful Ii clan requesting the use of their forecourt in order to commit *seppuku* (also known as *hara-kiri*), or ritual suicide performed by disemboweling oneself.⁴⁹ He claims that his life as an impoverished, unemployed samurai shows no sign of improving, and that he would prefer to end his life honorably rather than wait in his dismal conditions for death to come to him. A clan counselor named Saitō meets with Hanshirō, and recounts to him the story of another *rōnin* named Chijiwa Motome who approached the Ii with the same request, but turned out not to

⁴⁸ Standish, 286.

⁴⁹ Edo was the former name for Tokyo, and was the capital of the Tokugawa Shogunate. The Tokugawa enforced a policy of alternate attendance for the feudal lords (*daimyō*) they ruled, stipulating that a lord was required to maintain a residence in Edo in addition to his home in his domain, and was to divide his time between each location. The policy's purpose was to strengthen the Shogunate's control over the *daimyō*, many of whom had their domains far from the capital and/or had been enemies of the Tokugawa previously.

have any intention of killing himself, instead hoping to be rewarded for his display of honor. Nonetheless, the Li clan forced Motome to commit *seppuku*. Hanshirō assures the counselor that he has every intention to die, and the ceremony is begun, at which point, through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that Motome was Hanshirō's son-in-law, merely attempting to provide for his ultimately doomed family, and that Hanshirō intends not to die quietly, but to teach the Li a lesson. Later, Hanshirō reveals that he, a poor *rōnin*, has defeated three of the clan's foremost swordsmen, and calls the Li's proclaimed "samurai honor," their ideology-bound vision of the warrior ethos, a mere façade. This affront initiates a battle between all of the Li retainers and Hanshirō, in which the *rōnin* is eventually defeated, but not before taking a number of other men with him and making a forceful statement on the emptiness of the Li clan's notions of honor. However, this statement appears to be erased as the Li clan removes any trace of conflict from not only their residence, but also from the official clan records.

Ultimately, *Hara-Kiri* offers a pessimistic view of the power of the individual to confront established systems and power structures, as demonstrated by Hanshirō's struggle and ultimate failure against the unyielding institution of samurai authority. However, the film's inherent pessimism is mitigated by the fact that, as an individual, Hanshirō never fully succumbs to the power of the institution he confronts, as Motome tragically does. Furthermore, he utilizes the autonomy he maintains to make a powerful statement on the emptiness of traditional and overly dogmatic notions of a warrior ethos. This ethos, as *Hara-Kiri* makes clear, is plural and somewhat amorphous, manifesting as a strict set of rules regarding how a warrior must live, his pursuit of martial prowess, a device with which exercise privilege and denote class difference, and beyond. In short, it

defies a rigid definition and can be employed for either positive or harmful ends, an issue with which the film grapples. Nevertheless, this concept is a source of legitimacy for the institution Hanshirō is pitted against; and yet, ironically, he more truly embodies a warrior ideal than do his opponents. It is not loyalty to an ideology, but to those he loves and to a sense of morality that informs Hanshirō's actions, revealing his identification with a profoundly human vision of the model samurai. Hanshirō's critiques of institutional authority, though erased by those for whom they were intended in the story-world, were nonetheless accessible to Japanese moviegoers in 1962. Moreover, these messages were delivered to audiences by a warrior figure, suggesting the character's ongoing relevance in the Japanese imagination as a defender of justice, provided his ideology did not overtake his humanity as in the case of the samurai of the Li clan.

Empty Ideologies

At the very beginning of the film, the audience is introduced to some of its most significant and overt symbols, namely an empty suit of armor and the labyrinthine and imposing Li compound itself, both of which underscore the nature of the enemy Hanshirō is about to confront. While these symbols highlight the power of the Li clan and the sheer size of Hanshirō's foe, they simultaneously reveal the clan's weakness: though the Li wield considerable power, the ideology meant to afford that power substance and legitimacy is hollow.

As the film begins with a fade in, the main subject of the shot is a suit of armor, the symbolism of which is established to some extent in this first scene. Initially, the armor looks imposing—the camera begins close upon its mustachioed mask as mist swirls about it and the room remains dark and mysterious—and it seems possible for a brief moment



Fig. 4: The gate to the Ii compound looms dauntingly in this shot, while Hanshirō, the individual, appears small before this symbolic representation of the institutional samurai authority it represents. However, this shot is also indicative of the film's thesis, that the honor upon which such authority rests is merely a façade, just like the more literal façade apparent in the gate.

that there may be a warrior inside it. However, as the camera pulls back, the mist recedes and the room lightens, it is revealed that the armor is on display and is empty. This brief moment contains the basis for the symbolism of the armor: that, like the dogmatic warrior ethic espoused by the clan it represents, though it appears imposing, it is empty, and its purpose now is only for show—it no longer has any functional use. Nevertheless, it does serve an ideological purpose, its formidable appearance highlighting the danger still present in the ideology it represents: that which leads to Motome's demise and that of Hanshirō's entire family.

Following these initial shots of the suit of armor, there is a shot depicting Hanshirō's arrival at the Ii compound's gates. The shot is dominated at first by Hanshirō, with his back to the camera, but as he moves toward the gates of the compound, the impressive structure begins to dwarf him (Fig. 4).⁵⁰ The symbolism in this shot is twofold. First, we have the gate itself, which, like the armor and the Ii clan's pretenses of embodying a warrior ideal, strikes

⁵⁰ *Hara-Kiri*, directed by Kobayashi Masaki (1962; Tokyo: Shochiku, 2011), Blu-Ray, 0:01:53.

an imposing image, one that commands respect and admiration, but is ultimately superficial, a façade. This massive gate and the fortified compound it seals serve as the external image projected by the Ii clan, as does their espousal of a supposed samurai ethic, which is similarly revealed to be a façade. The second instance of symbolism apparent in this shot is that of Hanshirō appearing to shrink as he moves toward the gate. Here, the individual is visually represented as becoming weak and insignificant when faced with the entrenched power inherent in institutionalized systems of authority as represented by the Ii clan and, by extension, the gate. He is shown here making his journey into the belly of the beast, an expedition from which he will not return, but one in which we as the audience are permitted to partake. In fact, as the credits roll immediately after this shot, the camera first shows a map of the compound, and then proceeds throughout the building, showing the audience through its secret interior, and finally ending back in the room housing the empty suit of armor.⁵¹ This tour of sorts signposts, via the established symbols of the armor and the structure itself, what the film seeks to achieve: to take us, the audience, past the façade of the Ii clan's concept of a warrior ethos rooted in ideology—represented by the walls of the compound—to its dark core, symbolized by the suit of armor.

Whereas these symbols define Hanshirō's opponents as adhering to a dogmatic, yet ultimately empty notion of a warrior ethic, a later scene, depicted in flashback, depicts the moment in which Hanshirō becomes most introspective and evaluates where he as a samurai stands in the struggle between humanity and ideology that characterizes this film. This scene occurs after samurai from the Ii clan have returned the body of Motome, Hanshirō's son-in-law, to him and his daughter, revealing that the young *rōnin* was carrying

⁵¹ *Hara-Kiri*, 0:02:34.

bamboo blades—having pawned off the steel ones—at the time of his suicide, which the Ii samurai demanded he use to perform the ritual. Once the other samurai have left, Hanshirō falls upon Motome’s corpse in tears, begging forgiveness from this son-in-law who had made every sacrifice for the family, even selling his blades, whereas the thought of doing so had never even occurred to Hanshirō. His sorrow becomes rueful anger, as he picks up his own sword, thinking aloud, “I would never let this go. It never entered my mind. The stupid thing was too dear to me, and I clung to it. To this stupid—”⁵² Hanshirō is unable to finish his sentence as he begins sobbing, repeatedly slamming his sword against the floor. In this scene Hanshirō questions himself and his values as a warrior, bringing to the fore the conflict between humanity and ideology that is central to his struggle against institutional samurai authority. Here, not only does Hanshirō reject the notions that the sword is anything more than an object and that it is central his identity as a samurai; he does so on the grounds of loyalty to those he loves, and with a raw, poignant display of emotion. Therefore, the warrior hero is renegotiated here with an emphasis on his humanity—he is demonstrated to be fallible, emotive, and most importantly, deeply loyal to his loved ones—at the expense of the more dogmatic and symbolic aspects of notions of a warrior ethos, such as the sword’s supreme importance as the “soul of the samurai” as the Ii clan claims.

Competing Performances

With this scene and the knowledge that Hanshirō defines himself and his mission in relation to justice for those he loves in mind, I will examine the manner in which he seeks this justice. Though Hanshirō is finally unable to create any kind of change in his

⁵² *Hara-Kiri*, 1:34:29.

immovable institutional foe, he, as an individual, maintains a position of power and control against them for the majority of the film. In order to maintain the weight of this balance of power in his direction, he stages an elaborate performance—not entirely unlike Sanjūrō in *Yojimbō*—designed to constantly situate him one step ahead of his enemies. Moreover, Hanshirō’s performance mirrors that of the samurai of the Ii clan, particularly in that, just as they toy with Motome, making him think at first that his plan would lead him to employment, and then forcing him to disembowel himself with his own bamboo sword, Hanshirō plays with them by slowly and deliberately revealing his identity, his intentions, and his capabilities as a warrior.

In the scenes concerning Motome’s arrival at the Ii residence and his *seppuku*, the samurai of the Ii clan are involved in a twofold performance. The broader component of the two is that of their dogmatic concept of the samurai ethic, which they display frequently and which informs the second piece of their theatrics: their manipulation of Motome. In tandem and inseparable, these two elements are what eventually compel Motome to carry out his grisly suicide. When Motome first arrives at the Ii compound, he is brought inside and told that he will be granted an audience with the son of the lord, who was highly impressed by his resolve to die. He is given a bath and fresh robes to wear for this meeting; however, it is an utter farce. Soon after he has changed into his new attire, Motome is met by another samurai of the house, Omodaka, who tells him that the lord’s son in fact said that though he was impressed by Motome’s commitment to an honorable death, he could not bring him on as a retainer because he was certain the *rōnin*’s resolve was too firm to be swayed. Instead, Motome is to be allowed to carry out the suicidal ritual.⁵³ This piece of

⁵³ *Hara-Kiri*, 0:15:00.

information is similarly predicated on a falsehood—though Motome will be permitted to commit *seppuku*, it is not due to any esteem the Ii hold him in; rather, they begin here to mock the young *rōnin*. The Ii offer him extensive praise on the basis of his honor and valor, though both parties are fully aware of his intentions in coming to the Ii residence. Such sarcasm and derision pervade the Ii samurais' interactions with Motome, and characterize their elaborate charade until the ceremony is complete. For instance, when Motome has finally donned his white death robes and taken his position in the middle of the compound's courtyard to perform the ritual, Saitō has all of his retainers gather and surround the doomed man, ostensibly to partake in the impending spectacle, stating that his reason for doing so is “so that they may witness the noble demise of a true warrior.”⁵⁴ Such ironic subtext appears again when Motome is presented with his own sword, the blade of which is bamboo, for the ceremony. Upon the presentation Omodaka tells the horrified Motome, “A samurai's sword is his soul. No blade could be more fitting for this purpose than your own.”⁵⁵ In all of these instances the samurai of the Ii clan are mocking Motome on the basis of his supposed lack of honor, and making a performance out of the mockery. By treating Motome superficially as though they hold him in high esteem and never breaking this charade, the Ii turn the ritual of *seppuku* into a farce meant to humiliate Motome and afford themselves a sense of moral superiority in comparison to this man they consider a debased parody of a samurai.

Upon his arrival to the compound, Hanshirō begins to completely reverse the power dynamic established in the scenes involving Motome's death. Rather than allow himself to be manipulated by the Ii as Motome was, Hanshirō sets his plan into motion and always

⁵⁴ *Hara-Kiri*, 0:24:34.

⁵⁵ *Hara-Kiri*, 0:28:26.

remains one step ahead of Saitō and the other samurai in doing so. His scheme relies upon the deliberate presentation of particular pieces of information to the Ii regarding his identity, his true purpose in coming to their residence, and the extent of his martial prowess, with the effect of eliciting increasing degrees of concern and disconcertment from his foes. He begins by revealing that he in fact did know Motome, and that he was charged with the young man's care upon the death of his father. Moreover, it is at this time that Hanshirō has requested three different Ii men to serve as his second for his suicide—a role that involves beheading the man performing the ritual so as not to prolong his suffering—feigning surprise and disappointment when he is told they are not presently in attendance, all claiming illness. What is truly telling of the dynamic developing between Hanshirō and Saitō in particular at this point is when Hanshirō requests the third man, he does so with an entirely blank face and a firm, confident voice, whereas Saitō's eye twitches subtly, highlighting his growing unease. Hanshirō knows full well that the men he requests are all absent, yet he says to Saitō, "Counselor, surely it's not possible that Master Kawabe is also under the weather?"⁵⁶ Just as the samurai of the Ii clan toyed with Motome, now Hanshirō plays his own games with them. When he finally produces the topknots of these three supposed master swordsmen, Hanshirō does so with a dash of showmanship, declaring, "I must return some items that belong to this house," also indicating that his opponent is not any one individual, but the institution as a whole.⁵⁷ At that he withdraws two topknots from his robe and tosses them to the dirt in front of him while Saitō looks on in horror. Hanshirō explains that while these two men were relatively easy to track down and defeat, the third, Omodaka, posed a greater challenge. Yet, he produces a third topknot and throws

⁵⁶ *Hara-Kiri*, 0:49:24.

⁵⁷ *Hara-Kiri*, 1:44:24.

it to the ground with the others, saying with a cackle, “Taking his head would have been difficult enough, but taking only his topknot proved more difficult still.”⁵⁸ Here again, Hanshirō is in complete control, his highly choreographed performance controlling even the pacing of his interaction with Saitō. While this does indeed serve the purpose of pacing the film’s story in an interesting fashion, it also demonstrates that the balance of power between Hanshirō and Saitō falls squarely on the former’s side. This power is not martial or physical in any way; instead, it has to do with manipulation and cleverness, with which Hanshirō demonstrates great aptitude. Moreover, Hanshirō utilizes his dominant position at this point to make his ultimate critique of the Ii’s purely ideological notion of the samurai ethic, pointing out that the three warriors he defeated, though considered to be the best the clan had to offer, first of all allowed themselves to be disgraced more severely than if they had been killed in battle, and second, hid this shame by waiting at home for their topknots to grow back, neglecting their duties to the clan. In this manner, Hanshirō makes a potent case for the samurai ethos being “nothing more than a façade.”⁵⁹ This statement is made possible and impactful due to Hanshirō’s carefully crafted act, which most importantly affords him a voice with which to proclaim his indictment of institutional samurai authority.

Hanshirō arrives at the Ii compound with the intention to die, and though he is indeed killed in his struggle against the Ii and the institutionalized power they represent, he maintains his agency to the very end—always the manipulator, not the manipulated. Hanshirō employs the control he maintains chiefly in the form of his elaborately constructed performance, which inverts the dynamic of power the Ii establish in their

⁵⁸ *Hara-Kiri*, 1:57:40.

⁵⁹ *Hara-Kiri*, 1:58:15.

dealings with Motome. In these interactions the Ii manipulate and humiliate the young *rōnin*, only to have Hanshirō do the same to them when he turns the courtyard and the platform intended for *seppuku* at its center into his own stage.

Honor in Irony

Over the course of the film and in the midst of his aforementioned performance, Hanshirō proves himself in multiple ways to be, ironically, a superior samurai and a better representative of a warrior ideal than his opponents, despite his denunciation of the idea of what he refers to as “samurai honor,” the notion of a warrior ethos based in dogma. There are two main facets to Hanshirō’s superiority: that which is purely martial, and that which has to do with a sense of morality, yet there is significant overlap between the two. These are revealed both to the audience and to the Ii clan first with Hanshirō’s recounting of his duels with the three swordsmen whose topknots he took, the supposed masters of the Ii clan. As he tells the story of his clash with Omodaka, Hanshirō delivers a particularly telling line: “Swordsmanship untested in battle is like the art of swimming mastered on dry land. On the other hand, I had not seen battle either since the siege of Osaka Castle 16 years ago.”⁶⁰ He refers here to the swordsmanship practiced by the Ii clan as almost academic, a product of the time of peace in which these younger warriors were brought up. Moreover, he mentions his own participation in a famous battle, which underscores the point that he is simply a more capable fighter, and that this capability stems from real experience, whereas the supposedly great valor of the Ii samurai does not translate beyond the walls of the training room. Thus, Hanshirō proves himself to be a greater samurai than his

⁶⁰ *Hara-Kiri*, 1:56:54.

The siege of Osaka Castle ended in a decisive victory for the Tokugawa, and was the final major battle in securing their power over Japan.



Fig. 5: A wounded Ii samurai collapses against a wall bearing the crest of his clan, smearing it with blood and rendering it impure and tarnished, symbolizing the stain upon the clan's honor that Hanshirō has exposed.

opponents in a martial context, challenging the Ii claim to authority, which depends entirely upon their status as warriors, and proving its hollowness.

Immediately following the scene in which Hanshirō relates the story of his victory over Omodaka to Saitō and the other Ii samurai, Saitō orders all the samurai of the house to cut the rōnin down. In the ensuing battle, Hanshirō stands alone, vastly outnumbered. Though this in itself is indicative of his valor, there are a number of key symbolic moments within this confrontation that crystallize the most significant elements thereof. The skirmish begins in the courtyard, from which Hanshirō begins to move deeper into the compound. As he does so, he strikes down one foe who falls, bloodied, into the crest of the Ii clan upon the wall (Fig. 5).⁶¹ His wounds leave bloodstains smeared upon the crest, marring it, just as Hanshirō in his tale of the strife caused by Motome's death and in defeating the clan's premier swordsmen in spectacular fashion has tarnished the ideal warrior image the Ii have so carefully cultivated. In this moment, therefore, Hanshirō's superiority as a swordsman reveals the inadequacies of the Ii, not only in that he has

⁶¹ *Hara-Kiri*, 2:01:45.

defeated one of their warriors, but also symbolically in the defiling of their crest and, therefore, the notions of honor they fetishize.

Perhaps the most striking moment at the film's end suggesting Hanshirō's martial prowess comes at the time of his death. At this point in the film, Hanshirō has made his way through the depths of the compound, finally arriving at the room which houses the symbolic suit of armor. He hoists the suit of armor and begins to move as though he intends to leave the room carrying it, but he is interrupted by the arrival of three men bearing muskets. Hanshirō lifts the armor above his head and throws it to the ground, ruining the symbol of the Li clan's supposed honor and echoing the sully of the crest. However, the manner in which Hanshirō is ultimately subdued is equally damning of Li pretensions of acting as guardians of a samurai ethos. Immediately after casting down the suit of armor, Hanshirō plunges his sword into his gut and commits *seppuku* in sight of all the Li retainers. As he does so, the gunmen fire.⁶² If the sword is indeed the soul of the samurai as the Li retainers are so fond of saying, then the use of firearms to defeat another sword-wielding warrior is surely indicative of a relinquishing of a pretense of honor to some extent. The fact that the weapon these samurai consider to be central to the warrior's identity is insufficient in their hands to subdue Hanshirō further elucidates the emptiness of their claims of honor and martial valor. In fact, the shot depicting the samurai firing upon Hanshirō clearly emphasizes the firearms in the frame far more than the men holding them, suggesting that they have in some way debased themselves by adopting such a weapon.⁶³ Moreover, Hanshirō's *seppuku* has made the use of firearms somewhat redundant and creates a sharp contrast between the way he chooses to die and the way the Li choose to kill

⁶² *Hara-Kiri*, 2:06:10.

⁶³ *Hara-Kiri*, 2:06:22.

him. As the Ii have already established in the film, *seppuku*, when carried out sincerely, is a profoundly honorable undertaking, whereas the use of a firearm instead of a sword represents a degradation of the Ii's imagined role as samurai exemplars. Therefore, this scene represents an ironic inversion of the notion espoused by the Ii of themselves as paragons of a warrior ideal, instead elevating Hanshirō, who claims that "samurai honor," or the dogmatic notion of a samurai ethos, is a sham, to the status of samurai exemplar. The irony of the situation is not lost on Saitō, who in his efforts to cover up the events of the day says, "All our own men died of illness. The house of Ii has no retainers who could be felled or wounded by a half-starved *rōnin* . . . Their deaths have nothing to do with [Hanshirō's]." ⁶⁴ He indicates here that he realizes Hanshirō has performed more honorably than the retainers of his own clan and has demonstrated that he is indeed a superior samurai. However, this reality is entirely unpalatable to him and inconsistent with the image of the Ii as exemplary samurai. Therefore, it must be stricken from the record.

Conclusions

As the film draws to a close, we see that the courtyard thrown into disarray by the battle is being reassembled, the blood has been cleaned from the Ii crest, and in the film's final shot the suit of armor has been set back in its place as though it never moved. ⁶⁵ While this physical erasure of any evidence of Hanshirō's struggle occurs, Saitō speaks in a voiceover, claiming that Hanshirō had committed *seppuku* after displaying erratic behavior and "signs of derangement," and that the Ii clan showed commendable judgment in the handling both of his case and Motome's. He further asserts, "Word of the martial rigor of

⁶⁴ *Hara-Kiri*, 2:07:23.

⁶⁵ *Hara-Kiri*, 2:09:37.

this house echoed throughout Edo.”⁶⁶ Thus, in the story-world of the film, Hanshirō’s message has been ostensibly erased. This begs the question of whether his elaborate performance and eventual death ultimately constitute an exercise in futility. To arrive at an answer, it is necessary to consider the medium of film, and the advantages it lends to an audience. These advantages are most clearly illustrated in the film’s beginning and end, when the images on screen are paired with Saitō’s voiceover of the official Ii clan records, which offer a narrative that is simultaneously subverted by what the film allows us to see.

For instance, in the film’s beginning, when the symbols of the suit of armor and the physical structure of the compound are introduced, the nature of the Ii clan’s character is communicated to the audience: superficially imposing and impressive, but ultimately without substance. The dramatic nature of these symbols contrasts sharply with the mundane clan records, which are concerned primarily with the weather and the delivery of fish from the clan’s domain, and which mention Hanshirō’s arrival seemingly as an afterthought.⁶⁷ In combining these symbols with Saitō’s reading, the film demonstrates the dynamic at play within it between a story simultaneously erased within the story-world and witnessed by its audience. At the film’s end this process becomes especially apparent as, despite Saitō’s voiceover’s claiming the greatness of the Ii, we are allowed to see the clan’s extensive efforts to conceal the humiliation resulting from Hanshirō’s actions. Thus, despite the Ii clan’s aim to keep “what happens within the walls of this compound . . . as secret as what happens behind the walls of our castle back home,” and their success in eventually suppressing Hanshirō, the audience remains privy to all that the *rōnin* reveals

⁶⁶ *Hara-Kiri*, 2:11:29.

⁶⁷ *Hara-Kiri*, 0:01:09.

pertaining to the hollowness of the Ii clan's dogmatic vision of a samurai ethos.⁶⁸ We the audience have witnessed the *rōnin's* story, which is intimately involved with notions of individualism, tradition, and institutionalized structures of authority, all of which have the potential for particular resonance in the Japanese social and political climate in the 1960s. Therefore, Hanshirō's sacrifice is not made in vain. Though silenced in the story-world, the truths he elucidates are nonetheless accessible to the film's audience, thereby alleviating to some extent the film's otherwise pervasive pessimism.

Additionally, it should be noted that it is Hanshirō's samurai status that allows him to penetrate the Ii clan's façade, be it literal, as in the compound walls, or that which exists metaphorically in the clan's ideology. As a samurai, he is permitted to enter the Ii compound, whereas a person of another class would not be, as well as make use of the samurai ritual of *seppuku* as a pretense under which to do so. Moreover, the ritual affords him a position of attention upon a stage at the center of the Ii clan's retainers, which in turn enables his carefully constructed performance. Because he is a member of the warrior class, Hanshirō has at his disposal a particular set of tools and privileges that, somewhat ironically, enable him to confront the aspects of his class involved with institutional authority and its employment of ideology, embodied in the Ii clan. It is necessary, therefore, that the hero in this film be a samurai, as he possesses the means to infiltrate the Ii compound, revealing its interior while simultaneously exposing the clan's ideology-bound brand of the samurai ethic as a mere façade. Thus, despite the fact that samurai are also the film's antagonists, the warrior figure remains a valid heroic template.

⁶⁸ *Hara-Kiri*, 0:51:37.

Though in the end he does not prevail, Hanshirō represents a heroic ideal, a warrior who never loses his autonomous individuality, and sacrifices himself for the sake of justice for those he loves—a brand of justice with humanity at its core. In *Hara-Kiri* the samurai constitute both sides of the conflict, representing the competing notions of individualism and traditional authority structures, justice and injustice. However, as Hanshirō demonstrates, the samurai, when not perverted and concerned with honor chiefly for the purpose of self-aggrandizement, maintains legitimacy as a heroic figure behind which people of the modern era can rally, whose just cause can still find resonance even in the postwar period. Furthermore, although the cynicism present in this film is far more pronounced than that in *Yojimbō*, the samurai protagonist himself represents a small glimmer of hope. This is not the case in the subject of the next chapter, *The Sword of Doom*, in which the protagonist is more villain than hero.

Chapter Three: *The Sword of Doom* and the Samurai as Villain

Whereas *Hara-Kiri* represented the 1960s trend of the “cruel *jidaigeki*” in its cynical take on the individual’s power in the face of structures of authority, Okamoto Kihachi’s 1966 film *The Sword of Doom* embodies the genre’s trend toward cynicism primarily in its protagonist: the nihilistic swordsman Tsukue Ryūnosuke (Nakadai Tatsuya). Okamoto’s film is an adaptation of the serialized novel *Daibosatsu Tōge*—meaning “Great Bodhisattva Pass,” which is the film’s Japanese title—written by Nakazato Kaizan from 1913 until his death in 1944. The novel was, ultimately, a religiously-based narrative that emphasized the Buddhist notions of the interconnectedness of all beings, transience, and the importance of compassion.⁶⁹ Nakazato’s story was adapted to film several times, first in two parts in 1935, and again in three-part versions in 1953, 1957-59, and 1960-61.⁷⁰ Therefore, *The Sword of Doom* cannot be considered a product solely of the 1960s trends in *jidaigeki*. However, as Geoffrey O’Brien explains in his essay on the film, “*The Sword of Doom: Calligraphy in Blood*,” Ryūnosuke and his story were widely known to the point that he became “one of those characters who seem to have escaped from their author’s control, taking on a life of their own.”⁷¹ It is for this reason that the film adaptations of Nakazato’s story sometimes take on different meanings and emphasize different elements of the story. *The Sword of Doom* for instance, downplays the religious elements inherent in Nakazato’s

⁶⁹ Standish, 280-3.

⁷⁰ Geoffrey O’Brien, “The Sword of Doom: Calligraphy in Blood,” *The Criterion Collection*, last modified January 6, 2015, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/358-the-sword-of-doom-calligraphy-in-blood>.

The Sword of Doom was meant to have sequels just as previous adaptations did, but these were never made.

⁷¹ O’Brien.

Also according to O’Brien, Okamoto was compelled to make *The Sword of Doom* by Toho, the studio he worked for, after their lack of enthusiasm for his previous film, *The Age of Assassins*. The studio likely assumed such a well-known story would be commercially successful.

novel. Instead, the film's focus rests upon the corrosive effects upon humanity of uninhibited violence and allegiance to the sword alone.

Whereas in the other films examined thus far the samurai protagonists utilize violence as a tool to achieve morally motivated ends, in *The Sword of Doom* the warrior is reduced to only his violent aspects. He is loyal to nothing but the sword, leaving him a hollow, incomplete human being. And yet, like Sanjūrō and Hanshirō, Ryūnosuke is a compelling character in that he is ultimately beholden to no one. However, Ryūnosuke's independence manifests not in an increased capacity for good, as in the other two cases, but in precisely the opposite fashion: in a lack of responsibility to people or ideologies that permits his extreme acts of violence. These acts of violence are complicated significantly, however, in that from them certain positive outcomes emerge—a new family is formed and a young samurai is granted the opportunity to develop as a swordsman. Nevertheless, this positivity is still born of negative circumstances and utterly without Ryūnosuke's intention. Even in such a cynical film, though, hope remains, albeit somewhat abstractly, as it emerges as an inadvertent byproduct of Ryūnosuke's cruelty, and is thus beyond not only his control to create, but everybody else's as well. Consequently, the iteration of the samurai figure presented in *The Sword of Doom*—who is purely antiheroic—gives a voice to the fears of its time that, though a brighter future was perhaps not a foregone conclusion, it might be random, haphazard, and not within the power of individuals to secure.

The film begins with a scene that establishes Ryūnosuke's violent nature succinctly. An old man and his granddaughter are traveling as pilgrims and stop at the Great Bodhisattva Pass. As the old man prays, Ryūnosuke arrives and cuts the man down in cold

blood, only to test his own skill, we are later told. Soon thereafter, Ryūnosuke arrives home, where his father begs him to purposefully lose in a fencing match the next day, as his opponent, Utsugi Bunnojō, and his family have much to gain through the victory, whereas defeat will mean ruin for their house. Bunnojō's wife, Hama, also attempts to convince Ryūnosuke to throw the match, eventually managing to do so by exchanging sex for Ryūnosuke's agreement. However, Ryūnosuke ultimately kills Bunnojō and is forced to leave home to avoid the repercussions, taking Hama with him, as she has nowhere else to go. Time passes, and Ryūnosuke and Hama have moved to Edo and had a child, but live a poor and unhappy life. Ryūnosuke has joined the Shinsengumi, a group committed to the preservation of the Shogunate, as a hired sword.⁷² Like *Yojimbō*, *The Sword of Doom* takes place in the *bakumatsu* period immediately preceding the Shogunate's collapse and the emergence of the Meiji modern nation state. While living in Edo, Ryūnosuke discovers that Bunnojō's younger brother, Hyōma, is also living in the city, training under Shimada Toranosuke (Mifune Toshirō). Both men eventually come to consume Ryūnosuke's thoughts as he fixates upon killing them. After she eventually attempts to kill him, Ryūnosuke murders Hama and abandons their child, relocating to Kyoto to continue to work for the Shinsengumi. Hyōma follows him there, and with the help of a thief and of the granddaughter of the old man murdered at the film's beginning hatches a plan to exact his revenge upon Ryūnosuke, attacking him at a Shinsengumi party held at the brothel where the granddaughter, Omatsu, is training to become a courtesan. The film ends with the Shinsengumi men turning against each other and Ryūnosuke's homicidal rampage against them following a descent into madness.

⁷² At the time Ryūnosuke joins the group in Edo, they are known as the Shinchōgumi. It is once they relocate to Kyoto that they call themselves the Shinsengumi.

The Warrior Without Feeling

In both *Yojimbō* and *Hara-Kiri*, the heroic samurai protagonist displays emotion of one variety or another at numerous points throughout the film, whether Sanjūrō's mirth at the sight of his enemies battling each other, or his frustration with people he deems weak, and in Hanshirō's case the alternate grief and righteous fury as reactions to the injustice he seeks to expose. In Ryūnosuke, such emotion surfaces briefly and subtly if at all. More often than not, his eyes and face are vacant. *The Sword of Doom* makes this expressionlessness particularly apparent in that it pays a great deal of attention to faces, highlighting them so as to create obvious juxtapositions between Ryūnosuke, who appears to feel nothing, and those around him, who frequently experience distress as a result of his actions. The first key example of the comparison of faces the film offers comes in the scene that introduces the film as well as Ryūnosuke, in which the samurai cuts down the old pilgrim seemingly without reason. Alone, the murder itself does not fully reveal what kind of character Ryūnosuke is; instead, it is through the juxtaposition of his face with that of his victim that the nature of his evil is fully communicated.

Ryūnosuke approaches the man while he is in prayer (incidentally, praying for his own death so that he will no longer be a burden to his granddaughter) and calls out to him, instructing him to "look to the West."⁷³ As he realizes his demise is at hand, the camera pulls in close to the old man's simultaneously surprised and terrified face before Ryūnosuke kills him with a single strike. However, immediately following the fatal blow,

⁷³ *The Sword of Doom*, directed by Okamoto Kihachi (1966; Tokyo: Toho, 2008), DVD, 0:04:26. The instruction to "look to the West" is an allusion to the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, which was thought to lie to the West of Japan, and was conceptualized as a kind of paradise where one could be reborn after death, and which presented ideal conditions for breaking free from the cycle of death and rebirth outlined in Buddhism. Ryūnosuke is telling the old pilgrim to prepare for death, as it was a common practice in premodern Japan to position people on their deathbeds to the West so that they might see Amida as he welcomed them to his Pure Land.



Fig. 6: The first of many close up shots on Ryūnosuke's face. Having just murdered the old pilgrim, his expressionlessness reflects the emptiness of his violence and his numbness to it.

the shot hones in on Ryūnosuke's face, which is slowly exposed as he looks up, permitting us a view under the hat that had previously obscured his features (Fig. 6). His face is almost entirely blank, showing slight expression for only an instant, which communicates not only that he feels almost nothing upon taking a life—perhaps even that killing is the only way he comes close to experiencing feeling, as evidenced by the flicker of expression—but also mirrors the hollowness of his violent acts. When Ryūnosuke kills, he does not do so for a cause, nor with any kind of moral motivation. Instead, his use of violence is devoid of meaning, just as his face is virtually empty of expression. This is not to say that Ryūnosuke never displays any kind of expression whatsoever; however, when he does, it only serves to underscore the hollowness of violence as he employs it. Perhaps the most striking example in which Ryūnosuke's face shows any extent of emotion comes after he massacres the group of men seeking revenge for Bunnojō's murder. Here, he stands still for a moment after cutting down dozens of men, and the camera moves around from behind him to reveal his face.⁷⁴ Ryūnosuke is smiling, but only faintly, and his eyes seem to

⁷⁴ *The Sword of Doom*, 0:29:50.



Fig. 7: Ryūnosuke smiles slightly and stares vacantly at nothing in particular following his slaughter of men from Bunnojō's sword school. His expression here communicates both his sadism and the idea that violence used for such ends is hollow and without purpose.

stare blankly into the distance at nothing in particular (Fig. 7). This limited facial expression is unsettling and somewhat reminiscent of drunkenness, as if Ryūnosuke is intoxicated by the bloodshed. Yet, like in the murder of the old pilgrim, his eyes remain vacant, suggesting the emptiness inherent in his sadism. The brief moment of pleasure is fleeting and ultimately hollow. Therefore, the lack of purpose in his use of violence is underscored by the vacancy apparent in his face.

The apparent absence of Ryūnosuke's capacity for feeling is evident not only in his facial expressions or lack thereof, but also in his relationship with his family. In this connection, his loyalties and his focus lie ultimately with his sword, which will always take precedence over family. This aspect of the film is particularly compelling when compared with *Hara-Kiri* and *Yojimbō* and the role of the family in both. In *Hara-Kiri* Hanshirō fights specifically for his family—the injustices done to them are representative of the larger scale wrongs perpetrated by a corrupt institution. Similarly, in *Yojimbō* the family is an important touchstone and symbolizes the world in disarray, as in the family breaking apart

in the film's beginning, and its reconstruction thanks to Sanjūrō as embodied by the family he reunites. Ryūnosuke makes his priorities obvious quite early in the film when he responds to Hama's plea that he intentionally lose the match to Bunnojō, saying, "I trust only my sword in this world. When I fight, I have no family."⁷⁵ This particular line indicates the emptiness that lies behind Ryūnosuke's eyes as he kills. Unlike Sanjūrō and Hanshirō, for whom the family was intimately tied with their moral ends, Ryūnosuke has no loyalty to his family or to other people, only to his blade.

All three films are similar, however, in that the family is something of an indicator of the moral state of its surroundings. In *Yojimbo* the divided and reunited families are representative of the fraying and restoration of the social order respectively. In *Hara-Kiri*, the family perishes as a result of the moral negligence of the institutional authority Hanshirō confronts. By the time in *The Sword of Doom* that Ryūnosuke has fled with Hama, the widow of the man he murdered, and the two have had a child, it is clear that the family unit envisioned here is far from healthy. In the film's domestic scenes, Ryūnosuke is frequently seated in a different room from Hama and the infant, and is drinking more often than not. Hama only remains because she has no means of support other than Ryūnosuke, and she often laments that she has been forced into such unhappy circumstances. No scene illustrates Ryūnosuke's attitude toward his family better than that in which he informs Hama that he plans to leave for Kyoto to continue working with the Shinsengumi. The news shocks her, and she implores Ryūnosuke to consider her well-being and the baby's, and not to abandon them. However, her pleas fall on deaf ears as Ryūnosuke cleans his sword throughout the exchange, focusing only on the blade and never looking in Hama's direction

⁷⁵ *The Sword of Doom*, 0:11:34.



Fig. 8: As Hama begs Ryūnosuke not to abandon the family, his eyes never leave his sword, symbolizing his allegiance to the blade above all else, and highlighting his unfeeling nature.

(Fig. 8). The scene's symbolism is obvious: the blade's stealing Ryūnosuke's attention away from his distressed family in this particular instance is representative of where his allegiances ultimately lie. To him, nothing is of greater significance than the sword, suggesting that he is a somehow incomplete human being. His blind devotion to the blade has rendered him incapable of sympathizing with even those meant to be closest to him. Therefore, the warrior, when reduced to merely his violent characteristics, is portrayed as being monstrous, even psychopathic, lacking the capacity for the affective and moral bonds that hold together a family—or even for such a basic human trait as compassion.

Additionally, Ryūnosuke's style of fighting makes evident his particularly ruthless, indulgent relationship to violence. His "silent form," as it is called, is highly unusual, as his father explains early in the film: "I do not fully understand your sword form. You draw out your opponent. Then, in an unguarded moment, you cruelly..." His voice breaks off. "This cruelty does not stop with your swordsmanship. It seems to have seeped into your mind

and body.”⁷⁶ Ryūnosuke’s style of fighting is deceitful and manipulative, inconsistent with notions of nobility in combat. As his father suggests, it seems that the sword form has influenced other aspects of Ryūnosuke’s character, and not the other way around—the root of his evil lies in his sword and in his unnatural, cruel approach to fighting. In Ryūnosuke’s case, it is as though the sword and the manner in which it is wielded takes precedence over the person wielding it, suggesting again that Ryūnosuke has surrendered his humanity to the blade.

The Warrior Without a Cause

Unlike Sanjūrō and Hanshirō, Ryūnosuke does not fight with a particular purpose. Throughout the majority of the film, killing is how he makes his living, working with the Shinsengumi, a “ruthless Tokugawa murder squad” whose aim was to preserve the Shogunate amidst the turbulence of the *bakumatsu* period.⁷⁷ This description is consistent with the group’s portrayal in the film, which involves regular assassinations of political targets in which Ryūnosuke is frequently instrumental. However, his involvement with the group is not based in an ideological affinity, but instead merely in his capacity for violence and his need for money—he is not a formal member of the group, simply a hired killer. Were he to side fully with the Shinsengumi, he could be understood relatively simply as an ideologically motivated villain, one who has an ultimate end in mind and employs cruel means to achieve it, not unlike counselor Saitō of the Ii clan in *Hara-Kiri*. However, this is clearly not the case. Instead, his cruelty perplexingly seems to stem from nothing other than an inherent appetite for bloodshed. And yet, the idiosyncratic and individualistic

⁷⁶ *The Sword of Doom*, 0:08:22.

⁷⁷ Stephen Turnbull, *The Samurai Swordsman: Master of War* (Tuttle Publishing, 2008), https://books.google.com/books?id=zQjQAgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=shinsengumi&hl=en&sa=X&ei=OOUiU_D9CoqGIAW4gYGIAw&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=shinsengumi&f=false.

nature of his violence renders him quite a compelling character in that he is clearly differentiated from those around him, as were the samurai protagonists of the other two films. Though he is always both physically and socially distant from his Shinsengumi comrades, Ryūnosuke's disconnectedness is particularly obvious in a scene near the film's end, which finds the group in the midst of revelry at a Kyoto brothel. While courtesans play instruments and warriors relax and indulge in food and drink, the camera follows a drunken member of the Shinsengumi as he stumbles across the crowded room, eventually stopping as he sits down abruptly in front of Ryūnosuke, who sits alone. The drunken man complains of recent setbacks in their mission, but finishes with the statement, "We'll raise a ruckus and become famous!" The shot then moves to Ryūnosuke, whose mouth twitches in a brief, wry smile.⁷⁸

The nature of Ryūnosuke's relationship to the Shinsengumi and their ideology, as well as what makes him a particularly compelling character, is illustrated succinctly in this scene. Contrast is established between the scene, which begins dynamically with revelry and with the camera following the drunken man, and Ryūnosuke himself, who sits almost completely still and is focused upon with a static shot. The implication of this juxtaposition is that Ryūnosuke is a completely separate entity from the rest of the group, that he does not take part in their vices, nor does he share their aims. Indeed, as his subtle smile suggests, he finds their notions of fame and glory ridiculous. Even his clothing is different from the clothing of those around him—he maintains his simple robes rather than adopt the Shinsengumi uniform. Moreover, his apparent idiosyncrasy and unwillingness to conform liken him to both Sanjūrō and Hanshirō, who stand clearly apart from all those

⁷⁸ *The Sword of Doom*, 1:38:10.

around them. However, though all three samurai protagonists are untethered by ideologies imposed on them from without—or openly refuting them in Hanshirō’s case—Sanjūrō and Hanshirō both fight with a righteous cause in mind, utilizing violence as a means to that end. For Ryūnosuke, violence itself seems to be the end, his freedom from dogma and responsibility to others precisely what enables it. The vision of individualism in this film is, therefore, a significantly darker one than in either *Yojimbō* or *Hara-Kiri*. Though Ryūnosuke’s ability to resist conformity renders him a compelling figure, without a cause or people to fight for, the bloodshed he causes is not only meaningless; he is accountable to no one nor a belief system for his actions.

Evil Mind, Evil Sword

While it is productive to compare Ryūnosuke with Sanjūrō and Hanshirō, the film provides its own foil to the protagonist in Shimada Toranosuke, Utsugi Hyōma’s sword instructor. The scene most clearly inviting comparison between Shimada and Ryūnosuke involves one of the film’s major swordfights, which occurs between Shimada and members of the Shinsengumi who have mistaken him for a political target. As the fighters set upon Shimada, he cuts them down easily, piling corpses and severed limbs in the snow around him. Ryūnosuke does not join the fray, however, instead looking on wide-eyed as his comrades are swiftly dispatched. As Shimada comes to the last man, he wrestles him to the ground and furiously accuses him, “You hot-headed men made me kill against my will! The men lying here were good swordsmen!”⁷⁹ This particular scene mirrors that in which Ryūnosuke murders the members of Bunnojō’s sword school earlier in the film. Both he and Shimada capably defeat all of their many attackers; however, it is what each man does

⁷⁹ *The Sword of Doom*, 1:17:50.



Fig. 9: Ryūnosuke stands stunned before his Shinsengumi comrades killed by Shimada. This shot mirrors that which immediately follows his massacre of the men seeking revenge for Bunnojō's murder earlier in the film, though in this instance Ryūnosuke is facing the dead men, symbolically facing the consequences of unrestrained violence like that which he wields.

following his victory that is most telling of their differences. Whereas Ryūnosuke appears almost drunk on the slaughter he has wrought, Shimada is outraged that he has been forced to take so many lives. As Bruce Eder explains in his essay on the film, “Okamoto establishes Shimada as Ryūnosuke’s moral opposite, a thoughtful, introspective samurai—the film’s conscience.”⁸⁰ As such, Shimada offers a piece of wisdom as he leaves the scene: “The sword is the soul. Train the mind rightly to master the sword. An evil mind, an evil sword.”⁸¹ Clearly, this line is to be applied directly to Ryūnosuke, in whose mind there exists no ostensible thought other than to kill. As Shimada exits, Ryūnosuke’s typical blank stare is broken as his eyes widen and focus upon Shimada. Immediately thereafter, the camera pulls away from Ryūnosuke, bringing into the frame the corpses left by the battle (Fig. 9). This shot parallels that which immediately follows his encounter with the men seeking to avenge Bunnojō, in which he stands with his back to the corpses he has

⁸⁰ Bruce Eder, “The Sword of Doom,” *The Criterion Collection*, last modified January 15, 1996, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/932-the-sword-of-doom>.

⁸¹ *The Sword of Doom*, 1:18:12.



Fig. 10: Ryūnosuke stands with his back to the men he has just murdered. The next shot reveals his face (Fig. 10), which gives him the appearance of being intoxicated by the slaughter. This shot contrasts with that in Fig. 12, in which Ryūnosuke faces the men killed by Shimada.

produced (Fig. 10). In the later shot, however, he faces the men Shimada has killed, symbolically facing the consequences of uninhibited violence as exposed by the expert swordsman. Although Ryūnosuke is not personally responsible for the deaths of these men, they function almost as surrogates for his many victims, as he must still observe the carnage while Shimada's words hang in the air: "an evil mind, an evil sword." This interaction leaves Ryūnosuke shaken not only because Shimada has proven himself to be the only character in the film who could rival his prowess in combat, but also because of the cutting nature of his remarks. This is not to say that Ryūnosuke feels remorse, but combined with his recognition of Shimada as a genuine threat, the moralizing of Ryūnosuke's actions has left him without the same confidence he possessed in his blade when he was able to kill freely and without any thought for ethics.

If Ryūnosuke's encounter with Shimada represents the first instance in which his calm, unfeeling façade shows cracks, then the film's bloody conclusion realizes its complete disintegration as his own evil drives him mad. The film's end involves the coincidental

meeting of Ryūnosuke and Omatsu, whose grandfather Ryūnosuke murdered in the opening sequence. Neither character is aware of this connection between them, and it is when Omatsu mentions that she knows the Great Bodhisattva Pass because she traveled there with her grandfather that Ryūnosuke truly succumbs to madness as he realizes who Omatsu is.⁸² Hand in hand with Ryūnosuke's emerging madness goes a pronounced fear that he had previously displayed only briefly, both during and immediately following his encounter with Shimada. In this scene, however, it is his realization of Omatsu's identity that causes terror to overwhelm him. Though only moments earlier he had assured her that he was far more afraid of the living than the dead, upon discovering it was Omatsu's grandfather he murdered, he hears the bells of the shrine at the Great Bodhisattva Pass, and sits bolt upright and draws his sword. He proceeds to wreck the room, cutting apart his surroundings in a sort of wild, terrified self-defense as he is besieged by apparitions and voices of the people who have contributed to his madness, including those he has killed, such as the old pilgrim and Hama, those he fears, specifically Shimada, and even his abandoned son, whose cries he suddenly hears. It is noteworthy that this kind of fear is never displayed by any of the film's heroes, only its villain. Ryūnosuke is finally experiencing the consequences of his evil, which have manifested as a kind of psychological torture that renders him, for the first time, vulnerable. As Ryūnosuke continues to cut through screens and blinds attempting in vain to vanquish the phantasmal foes surrounding him, real enemies appear, members of the Shinsengumi sent to assassinate him. What ensues is the film's longest, most violent fight sequence, in which Ryūnosuke's terror morphs into rage, and he uninterruptedly cuts down the seemingly endless hordes of

⁸² *The Sword of Doom*, 1:49:53.



Fig. 11: Ryūnosuke loses himself to madness as his evil, no longer mitigated by his previously passive demeanor, takes hold. His face warps and he swings his sword wildly as the building around him burns, lending him the visage of a demon.

men as the building begins to burn down, accentuating the chaos in both Ryūnosuke's physical world and that of his psyche.

Two key shifts occur in Ryūnosuke during this sequence that underscore the extent of his madness. The more apparent of the two is perhaps the change in his facial expressions. Whereas he maintains a stoic, blank stare for the vast majority of the film, here he becomes enraged, appearing monstrous in his fury, and at times even gleeful as he strikes down the men sent to kill him. The absence of guile and subtlety in Ryūnosuke's facial expressions is paralleled in the second major observable change in him as he goes mad: the abandonment of his distinctive "silent form" of sword fighting. Rather than employ the subtle, deceitful finesse that characterized his swordplay up until this point in the film, Ryūnosuke flails wildly and aggressively, remaining extremely deadly despite the transformation of his fighting style. Thus, his madness is apparent in that it has completely dismantled the almost passive attitude he has maintained throughout the film, trading it for

a much more overt brand of psychopathy. As Ryūnosuke appears increasingly demonic as his facial features contort, he becomes bloodied, and flames surround him, it becomes clear that the voices and visions that began this sequence have not inspired remorse or repentance (Fig. 11). Instead, Ryūnosuke has succumbed to his evil to the point that he has lost complete control over himself and has fully embodied Shimada's warning, "an evil sword, an evil mind."

Conclusions

In *A New History of Japanese Cinema* Isolde Standish cites a Japanese literary critic, Ishii F., as claiming that the "'nihilism' . . . [of] the heroes of the cruel-*jidaigeki* films of the 1960s, although firmly rooted in the postwar period of the 'economic miracle', can be traced back to Tsukue Ryūnosuke."⁸³ As the prototype for many of the samurai protagonists of film at the time of *The Sword of Doom's* release, it is fitting his story would be retold contemporaneously with them. Moreover, it speaks to the resonance Ryūnosuke and his story must have had with Japanese audiences that it was retold so many times. The question, then, is where the source of this resonance lies. Clearly, it is of a different variety from that in a film such as *Yojimbo* in which the samurai is characterized as a savior, or in *Hara-Kiri*, in which the warrior battles against systemic violence. I contend that at least a component of Ryūnosuke's attractiveness as a protagonist, particularly in *The Sword of Doom*, has to do with his idiosyncrasy: that, like Sanjūrō and Hanshirō, he cannot be tamed, nor is he subject to rigid ideologies. In his own twisted way, he remains true to himself. However, he does not become a sympathetic figure as a result. Instead, in him is presented a vision of what the warrior becomes when he is stripped of his humanity, when he is

⁸³ Standish, 283.

nothing more than a killer. Whereas the other two films have demonstrated the notion that violence has the potential to serve as a legitimate tool for achieving moral aims, *The Sword of Doom* displays the results of violence employed for its own sake in Ryūnosuke's eventual descent into madness, in which he becomes evil incarnate and even less human than before. Therefore, what constitutes villainy for the warrior in this instance is the eschewing of relationships and ethical systems—that which is arguably profoundly human—in favor of a fetishistic relationship to the sword.

However, there is irony in that the consequences of Ryūnosuke's violence are not exclusively negative. Instead, at times his violence functions generatively, albeit stemming nonetheless from negative circumstances. Perhaps the clearest instance in which this process takes place does so over the course of the film, as a new family unit begins to form as a result of Ryūnosuke's murders. Following the killing of her grandfather, Omatsu is adopted by the wandering thief, Shichibei, who, by the end of the film, is attempting to marry Omatsu to Hyōma, who was similarly left bereaved by Ryūnosuke's murder of Bunnojō. In this case, Ryūnosuke's acts of violence have also served as catalysts, sending these people on intersecting paths that ultimately result in their coalescing as what may soon be a family, albeit a somewhat unconventional one. Ironically, this potential new family unit mirrors that which Ryūnosuke and Hama create in that neither forms conventionally, yet it lacks the strife and dysfunction inherent in Ryūnosuke and Hama's relationship. However, both visions of the family presented in the film are born of Ryūnosuke's violence. Not altogether unlike Sanjūrō in *Yojimbo*, Ryūnosuke has created the opportunity for a promising start to a family, but here in a completely negative, unintentional fashion.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that Ryūnosuke's killing of Bunnojō inspires Hyōma, a fundamentally good character, to become a better swordsman, affording him the opportunity for growth. Hyōma is shown in a number of scenes rigorously practicing a particular thrust that he hopes may penetrate Ryūnosuke's "silent form." Here, Ryūnosuke's violence has motivated Hyōma to push himself and grow as a warrior, both physically, as demonstrated by his continuous training, and mentally, as is revealed in a piece of advice Shimada gives him on the eve of what is expected to be his confrontation with Ryūnosuke. Shimada instructs Hyōma not to "try to win and live. Be prepared to die. Risk all, and you may have a chance."⁸⁴ In this manner, Ryūnosuke has, through his violence, generated an opportunity for Hyōma's development as a swordsman, forcing him not only to improve his technique, but also to consider his own mortality and come to terms with it in order to carry out his righteous aim.

However, in *The Sword of Doom*, unlike in the other two films discussed, the samurai protagonist can only create positive outcomes through purely antiheroic means: negatively, and without the intention of doing so. For instance, whereas in *Yojimbo*, Sanjūrō adopts the performative guise of antihero while remaining ultimately deliberate and moral in his aims, any good that comes of Ryūnosuke's actions is unintentional and rooted in wanton violence, characterizing him as a genuine antihero. Herein lies much of the film's cynicism, as hope, though not entirely unattainable, is accessible only as the byproduct of occurrences not within any individual's control, not even that of the samurai protagonist. Therefore, by the time of this film, it seems the samurai figure in film can no longer be heroic in a more traditional sense. Even Hyōma, who fits the traditionally defined role of

⁸⁴ *The Sword of Doom*, 1:26:30.

hero, never has the opportunity to face Ryūnosuke and carry out his mission. Instead, a positive outcome is envisioned here as possible only as the result of chaotic occurrences and cannot be ensured by an individual or an ethical system. Thus, although the samurai in this iteration is by far the most cynical of the three protagonists examined in this paper, he allows room for hope to remain in some small sense, albeit obliquely and nearly inaccessibly, both for the film's other characters and for its audience.

Conclusion

It may appear, and reasonably so, somewhat strange that these three films with warrior protagonists, along with many others, enjoyed widespread popularity in Japan during the 1960s, in the wake not only of the omnipresent militarism of the war, but also the threats to peace that many saw in Japan's alignment with the US in the Cold War thanks to the Anpo treaty. If the samurai was a component of an old, traditional Japan, it is somewhat perplexing that he remained a popular figure even as many Japanese people, particularly those who had protested the treaty, feared that their conservative government was leading the country back to its prewar state.⁸⁵ Moreover, the Anpo protests did not prevent the passage and signing of the treaty, and though Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke did step down, many among the protestors saw this as little consolation for what they considered a failed movement. 1960 also saw the beginning of the "income doubling plan" put into place by Kishi's successor, Ikeda Hayato. As the Japanese economy accelerated and people's personal incomes grew, their interest in politics dissipated. Thus, for many, the ideals of the Anpo protests appeared to have died.⁸⁶ The film industry appears to have responded to the shift in people's concerns as it abandoned its nostalgic *jidaigeki* of the 1950s in favor of more cynical, darker period films that frequently dealt with social ills that defied conventional solutions—if they were deemed to be solvable at all. Rather than take refuge in an idealized Japan of the past, the *jidaigeki* films of the 1960s frequently allowed their audiences to see their frustrations, concerns, and fears play out on-screen, with the

⁸⁵ Jesty, "Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage and Grief."

It is worth noting as well that Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, who became a focal point during the Anpo protests, was considered by many to epitomize prewar Japan. Jesty explains Kishi had come from an elite former samurai family and climbed the political ladder through the 1920s and 1930s, eventually securing a spot in General and Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki's cabinet.

⁸⁶ Jesty, "Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage and Grief."

samurai as an instrumental figure in processing them. As this paper has demonstrated, the warrior figure is highly dynamic, even within film from a particular decade, not to mention in all his prior iterations. For this reason, the malleability of the samurai is key to the figure's ongoing relevance and its usefulness as a tool to explore developing notions of a social order, particular in the postwar period.

In all three films investigated in this paper, the samurai protagonist is somewhat unconventional, albeit in quite different fashions and with a variety of results. In *Yojimbō* the samurai is heroic, capable, and ultimately moral, yet also tricky and cunning, not limited by a traditional or dogmatic idea of his status as a samurai. He offers a kind of escapism, particularly amidst the turbulence of the early 1960s, a vision in which, though the world has been thoroughly corrupted, it is not beyond saving. As Kurosawa contends, Sanjūrō is a hero because while we are weak, often powerless to correct the injustices of our world, he is capable of doing so.⁸⁷ Therefore, as the Cold War's unrest was felt in Japan and the Occupation's high-minded aims of democracy and peace seemed to crumble, a hero with the ability to stand in the middle of a conflict and restore order to his world on behalf of lowly, ordinary people was clearly a welcome vision. Moreover, the samurai was a viable template onto which this type of hero could be mapped, suggesting that by this era the figure, unbound by a distinct and rigid set of ideologies, could still easily serve as a savior, if under the guise of an antihero. As such, Sanjūrō demonstrates the samurai's role as an agent for the maintenance of societal balance and communal cohesion, which is illustrated perhaps most succinctly in the film's treatment of the family unit. Whereas *Yojimbō* opens with a family falling apart thanks to the dismal moral conditions of its setting, by the end of

⁸⁷ Richie, 147.



Fig. 12: Photograph by Hamaya Hiroshi taken during the Anpo protests of 1960 of protestors confronting police.

the film *Sanjūrō* has reunited a family, symbolizing the progress he has made in restoring a morally-grounded social order to his world. He is efficacious in maintaining order in a moral capacity, signifying a certain degree of optimism in the film, as it envisions communal cohesion as achievable, within the grasp of an individual—albeit an exceptional, heroic one.

In *Hara-Kiri*, Hanshirō fills a similar role in that he fights for justice and with a moral resolve not dependent upon dogma; however, the institutional foe he confronts is ultimately overwhelming. Despite the fact that he is defeated and silenced in the film, we, the audience, have witnessed the *rōnin's* story, which is intimately involved with notions of individualism, tradition, and institutionalized structures of authority, all of which have the potential for particular resonance in the Japanese political climate in the early 1960s. These concerns, along with numerous others of the time, were made manifest in the Anpo protests of 1960. In his essay “Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage & Grief” Justin Jesty identifies

these concerns and links them to the protests, particularly through Hamaya Hiroshi's photographs of the event, such as Figure 12, which he discusses as follows:

In one of his most iconic images, Hamaya shoots from behind police lines, capturing the confrontation between the uniform mass of helmets and a varied group of protesters, whose individual faces are all clearly visible. It centers on one man shouting at the impassive mass of police, the voice of one person against an armed, organized, and apparently indifferent state force.⁸⁸

In this single image are reflected many of the attitudes and concerns outlined in *Hara-Kiri*, not only those concerning the struggle between the individual and institutional authority, but also those having to do with the conflict between the conservative ideologies such institutions represent and a stance which seeks to dismantle it. Unlike *Yojimbō*, *Hara-Kiri* depicts an individual, though exceptional, ultimately being overwhelmed by forces that threaten a sense of moral social order, forces embodied in this case in institutionalized samurai authority. Therefore, in the face of such an institutional foe—which was not unfamiliar to many Japanese people at the time, as evidenced by the aforementioned photograph—the power of the individual is deemed insufficient to maintain such a social order. However, because the audience is able to bear witness to Hanshirō's struggle and the utter falsity and hollowness of the Ii clan's narrative, there is at least a partial victory available through the medium of the film itself. Although it is determined to be too large an adversary for any one person to take on, institutional authority is revealed in *Hara-Kiri* to have weaknesses and, ultimately, very little substance. Hence, a vision of social cohesion remains attainable in this instance, based upon the notion that humanity, as represented by Hanshirō, is able in some form to strike a blow against institutional, ideologically motivated opponents.

⁸⁸ Justin Jesty, "Tokyo 1960: Days of Rage and Grief."

Whereas Sanjūrō and Hanshirō have a number of similarities and shared heroic traits, Ryūnosuke and *The Sword of Doom* offer a radically different kind of samurai protagonist, one whose villainous qualities are much more apparent. For him, the fact that he is able to wield violence so effectively essentially gives him the permission to do so. Therefore, though he exercises his agency as an individual throughout the majority of the film as the other two samurai do, it is not employed for moral ends. His cruelty renders him nearly inhuman, as does his relationship to the sword, which he fetishizes and elevates above all else, including those people who ought to be close to him. He does not serve others, nor himself—he is loyal to the blade alone. Ryūnosuke is an example of what the warrior becomes when stripped down only to his violent characteristics, lacking the altruism or the ethics to mitigate them. However, from Ryūnosuke's violence and acts of cruelty spring certain opportunities for positivity, whether the potential for the formation of a new family unit or for the growth of a particular swordsman, but these are nonetheless the results of negative actions on the part of the protagonist, who has no intention of—or control over—creating such outcomes. Thus, in *The Sword of Doom*, if the samurai protagonist can be considered as holding together order on a moral level, he does so in a haphazard fashion that seems to reject the possibility that hope for social cohesion is within the grasp of any person, group, or ideology. Old heroes and social structures are determined here to no longer be feasible as a means of achieving a healthy, moral social order.

The trend of cynicism that develops in these films does not end in the 1960s, instead growing even more pronounced as the samurai films of the 1970s represent a turn to even darker, more violent material. A particularly illustrative example can be found in the *Lone*

Wolf and Cub film series, which ran from 1972 to 1974, the main character of which is the Shogun's executioner, traveling the country as an assassin seeking revenge for his murdered wife, all the while with his infant son in tow. These films feature spectacular, bloody violence, with "a body count that defies belief."⁸⁹ Here, the supposed hero's acts of violence stem from a place of personal negativity, motivated primarily by vengefulness, not from a broader concept of rectifying social ills. Moreover, the spectacle made of this violence goes beyond that which is featured in the films discussed in this paper—to some extent, this is violence for its own sake, not involved with any kind of loftier ends. It should be noted as well that the family unit, which so far has been a useful indicator of the social order imagined in each film, is represented here as quite warped, with the hero's infant son present during scenes of wholesale slaughter. In this series and many other films of the 1970s, the samurai protagonist no longer possesses the capability—or perhaps even the desire—to act as the maintainer of social order on a moral level. This would remain the case until the 1980s, when Japan's "economic miracle" was in full swing and consumerism was more fully embraced, with the country's economic success and newfound prominence globally serving in this era as the new narrative in which the nation could invest collectively.

⁸⁹ "Lone Wolf and Cub," *The Criterion Collection*, accessed April 3, 2017, <https://www.criterion.com/boxsets/1217-lone-wolf-and-cub>.

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