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Yojimbo: Ideology and Interpretation
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Yojimbo was directed by Akira Kurosawa in 1961. It is the story of a nineteenth century Japanese village that is controlled by two opposing merchants and their clans. The visit of a wandering samurai, who seeks work as a hired killer, interrupts their arguing over a gambling concession. The samurai, Sanjuro, is able to exploit both gangs using his skill with a sword. The story is an Eastern take on the Hollywood western with a dash of satire, with “The bodyguard who kills the bodies he is hired to guard.”¹ The film incorporates a humanist take on capitalism and its adverse outcome on society.

The main message of the film is the destructive nature of capitalism on society. This message is reasonably obvious given the nature of the story and its outcome. The opposing gangs are in markets for sake and silk, and their desire to dominate the market economically is what motivates them to kill. In Yojimbo, it is money that creates greed, and greed that necessitates murder. The film brings attention to the intentions of Western economy and attempts to prove the negativity and insatiability of these objectives. The earliest example of this in the film is when the bodyguard witnesses a son running away from his family to pursue a life of gambling. The fact that the son prefers a short, exciting life to a long, productive existence serves as a stepping-stone for the overall apathy of many of the story’s main characters. The choice of self-indulgence over self-fulfillment is an illustration of the moral emptiness of capitalistic values.

¹ Kael, Pauline. Film Theory and Criticism: Yojimbo. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Secondly, the story of Yojimbo shows other factors of capitalistic enterprises on society. In order to maintain their power, the battling gangs hire murderous henchmen to assure their survival both physically and in the economic market. This employment of men to sacrifice their lives is one example of the dehumanization of the entire system of capitalism. On another level of analysis, the very idea of paying men to risk their lives amounts to a commodification of people. In their very attempt at making money by becoming involved in the mercantile system, they are swept along as products instead of individuals. It is no wonder that life is so fragile when allegiance is given freely to the highest bidder. The viewer can identify with Sanjuro as the protagonist, because he is the only fighter that never chooses a side during the gangs' battles. He engages in killing eventually, but he recognizes and respects his own life as being more important than the redemption of a master's gambling concession.

Another important message of Yojimbo is necessity of the coffin-maker in the town's structure. The sheer magnitude of the economic factors in public life far outweighs the humanity in this setting. The banging of coffin production, perhaps the most dehumanizing sound in the entire film, serves as a constant reminder that the significance of capitalism has surpassed the value of human life. In his desire to earn a living, the undertaker is being nourished by the devastation of human life. In the simplest terms, it is a lifestyle that depends on death. The film is attempting to bring to the forefront

the absurdity of this way of life, in support of the values of humanity and existence.

Another angle on the film is in regard to the conflict of man versus machine. The weapon used by the samurai is his sword, which requires an element of skill and entails an entire individual set of ideologies. The brother of one of the gang leaders appears with a gun for the majority of the film. The gun, as a product of man, represents the absence of all of the ideologies that a samurai embodies. The utilization of a gun eclipses the man using it, and man becomes subordinate to the dexterity of the gun. Aside from this, drawing the ability to kill from the power of a gun removes the skill that is required to fight another man. These effects show the corruption of humanism and deteriorating of individual ability derived from a gun. The gun also happens to be an example of a merchant market good, and a representative of Western interference in Japanese culture. The final example of this in *Yojimbo* is when during his last few breaths, the gunfighter tells Sanjuro that he feels naked without his pistol, and asks to die with it in his hands. As a by-product of capitalism, this represents the ultimate weakness, man becoming dependent on his own creation for survival.

Through an examination of earlier films by Kurosawa, it is obvious that he does not support the merchant system as a means of replacing time-honored roles. His most famous films, particularly *Seven Samurai*, *Rashomon*, and *Ikiru*, decidedly embrace basic human emotion and man's moral principles. Why does he abandon these values and present a story that is

entirely void of this humanity? This is done deliberately to present it from a comic angle, suggesting how negative the consequences of capitalism can be. Even the protagonist is indifferent to right and wrong and is entertained by a profit, as is proven by his comments early in the film "I get paid for killing, better if all these men were dead." By attributing this intentionality to the bodyguard, it casts a shadow over the nature of his objective. The line is blurred further when Sanjuro bases his motives solely on the highest bidder, and then ends up giving his earnings away to a victimized family. It is not clear whether his goals are ever-changing or static. The only certainty is that he seems to be upholding the system of values of the samurai despite the economic impediments of the new climate.

As for Sanjuro himself, it can be said that he is a vengeful protagonist. The system of capitalism that is represented in the village he enters is the very societal occurrence that necessitates his current condition. The surfacing of capitalism at the end of the warring period, during which the samurais thrived, created a middle class. The emergence of this middle class was responsible for the extinction of the social roles once filled by the samurai and the replacement of traditional values with the newly established commercial ethos. In many scenes he seems to be simply acting out his aggression on whoever is closest to him, just to go against the grain. His nihilistic tendencies reveal the confusion of a warrior in peacetime, especially the uprooted nature of a masterless samurai in a strange social climate.

In summation, an examination of the diegetic world of Yojimbo reveals how the subtexts of a capitalist economy conflict with the ideologies of humanism. Almost everyone is dead by the end of the film, yet it is neither disturbing nor surprising. The manner in which they conducted themselves brought on their fate. Kurosawa's message is clear and concise, and the conflict he presents gives insight into the casualties of a market economy. Yojimbo delivers the importance of human morals by narrating an example of their absence.