

# Kurosawa's Eastern "Western": *Sanjuro* and the Influence of *Shane*"

David Desser

If we understand Donald Richie and Noël Burch to occupy a kind of co-chairmanship of Japanese film criticism in America and Europe,<sup>1</sup> they share their chair uneasily. Richie stands for a kind of international humanism in which he seeks to understand the Japanese film from an archetypical, psycho-cultural point of view. Burch represents the side of formalism and materialism, finding the Japanese cinema to be Hollywood's "other." Yet their respective programs converge in a significant way: they each use "Japaneseness" as a criterion of value. Films and filmmakers which manifest uniquely Japanese modes and points of view are valued above those which do not. "Japaneseness," of course, is defined differently for both men, yet it occupies a central position in their criticism.

The idea of Japaneseness has led both men to undervalue or misread one of the Japanese cinema's most important films: Akira Kurosawa's *Sanjuro*. Noël Burch is able to dismiss *Sanjuro* with an annoying condescension, telling us that the film has only a "slight interest,"<sup>2</sup> and saying it is nothing more than a "passing concession to popular taste."<sup>3</sup> Burch is able to dismiss *Sanjuro* because, like *Yojimbo*, it must be "nothing more than a fusion of the latter-day *chambara* [sic] tradition with the Hollywood Western...."<sup>4</sup> For Burch, the mainstream Hollywood cinema cannot, by definition, be politically progressive. Therefore, any filmmaker working in that mode is first of all to be castigated and second of all, cast out from the pantheon of Japaneseness. The possibility that Japanese filmmakers can utilize the classic Hollywood patterns for their own particular ends has escaped Burch. This has led to his dismissal of such a crucial film as *Sanjuro*.<sup>5</sup>

Richie, on the other hand, has nothing but praise for *Sanjuro*. He sees it as a consummate example of a film which satirizes and ridicules the standard *chambara* formula. For Richie, *Sanjuro* addresses the corruption and

hollowness of so much of contemporary *Bushido* and how the code has been turned into an empty set of clichés. For Richie, then, *Sanjuro* is a uniquely Japanese film. He says that *Sanjuro* is “stylistically...based upon only two factors: *Yojimbo* and the ordinary Japanese *jidai-geki*”<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added). Paradoxically, Richie has missed the Western influences upon *Sanjuro*, while Burch has missed its essential Japaneseness. Who is right?

Actually, both men are wrong in that they have missed Kurosawa’s essential technical strategy. Kurosawa has chosen to work in a dialectical mode of narrative and formal construction. In his very style he examines the relationship between Japanese and Western (American) film. This combinatory mode can best be seen in *Sanjuro*, which in many ways is basically a remake of George Stevens’ *Shane*. To show this I will demonstrate, using Will Wright’s *Sixguns and Society* as a standard of generic functions, the ways in which *Sanjuro* can be seen as a classic Western.<sup>7</sup> I will then go on to show the ways in which *Sanjuro* diverges from *Shane*. *Sanjuro* is obviously not a Western, but it is not a Western in specifically and significantly Japanese ways. The significance of the film thus rests in its deliberate conjunction of certain Western motifs and structures in order to create a work both meaningful to the Japanese and specific to the notion of Japaneseness. *Sanjuro* poses issues in cross-cultural adaptation and influence that are central not only to an understanding of Kurosawa’s oeuvre but to the Americanization of Japan.

Although the relevant criticism of Will Wright’s program in the Western film is not being ignored here, his morphology of the classic Western is strong enough, I feel, to underwrite my comparison of *Shane* and *Sanjuro*. Of course, I will be elucidating similarities that go beyond Wright, for the connections between *Shane* and *Sanjuro* are extremely strong.

According to Wright, *Shane* is a Western of the “classical” type, a type defined by some sixteen “functions” (a syntactical feature Wright adopts from Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk Tale*). Wright’s listing of functions comprises a virtual plot synopsis of *Shane*. With regard to other classical Westerns, Wright says that “not all the functions will apply to all the films,” but that basically all the films share a similarity: “Each film is the story of a hero who is somehow estranged from his society but on whose ability rests the fate of that society.”<sup>8</sup> This basic description fits *Sanjuro* as well. More importantly (for this description fits literally hundreds of other films within and without the Western genre), *Sanjuro* manifests some thirteen of the sixteen functions which define the classical Western:

- 1) The hero enters a social group.
- 2) The hero is unknown to the society.
- 3) The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability.
- 4) The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status.
- 5) The society does not completely accept the hero.
- 6) There is a conflict of interests between the villains and the society.
- 7) The villains are stronger than the society; the society is weak.
- 8) There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain.

- 9) The villains threaten the society.
- 12) The hero fights the villain.
- 13) The hero defeats the villain.
- 14) The society is safe.
- 15) The society accepts the hero.<sup>9</sup>

(Missing from this list are the following functions: 10) The hero avoids involvement in the conflict; 11) The villains endanger a friend of the hero; and 16) The hero loses or give up his special status.) More detailed analysis of *Sanjuro* and *Shane* will show similarities beyond this morphological level.

If we understand *Shane*, for all its formal brilliance, to have an essentially child-like appeal (a film willing to ignore its own subtleties by displacing the metaphysics and ethics onto character), so, too *Sanjuro* has this same phenomenological base. Both utilize children's point of view in their narrative, thereby imbuing the films with something of the nature of a folk tale. *Sanjuro* and *Shane* use children (or youths) as structuring principles to create heroic/mythic images out of their main characters. Both films work a dialectic between history and myth to comment upon the importance and meaning of myth in today's world. (The ways in which the treatment of myth differs separate the two films.)

*Shane* is first seen by little Joey Starrett framed between the antlers of a deer out on the horizon. Thus, *Shane* is immediately associated with nature. His links with the wilderness, further emphasized by his costume, make him a kind of autochthonous being in the mythic sense. The hero's arrival, seemingly from out of nowhere or from the very spot he inhabits, is duplicated in *Sanjuro*. The eponymous hero is introduced through the mediation of youngsters and is first heard and seen from their point of view. A disembodied laugh and an entrance from out of the shadows of a room mark the appearance of *Sanjuro*. It is significant that *Sanjuro* spring forth from this room, this civilized interior, for the film will take place primarily in and around such rooms as he then inhabits. Thus *Shane*, which is about the transformation of nature into culture, has a hero born of nature, while *Sanjuro*, which is about the return to culture, has a hero associated with it.

Both the characters of *Shane* and *Sanjuro* take on the role of mentor/teacher to the respective youths in the films. This teacher/disciple device is common to many Westerns, both classical and otherwise (e.g., *Red River*, *The Searchers*, *The Tin Star*, *Ride the High Country*), and it is also characteristic of many samurai films. But it is more particularly associated, as Richard Tucker has perceptively pointed out,<sup>10</sup> with Kurosawa's cinema (e.g., *Sanshiro Sugata*, *Stray Dog*, *Seven Samurai*, *Red Beard*). Teacher/disciple relationships characterize much of traditional Japanese culture, of course, so that I am by no means claiming that its appearance in *Sanjuro* is a function of its relationship to *Shane*. However, the quality of the relationship in *Sanjuro* differs from the "feudalistic" forms it takes in Kurosawa's other films, and this, I am claiming, is a function of its relationship to *Shane*. This role of mentor/teacher endows each hero with an added stature when the audience sees them through the eyes of youth.

In their roles as mentors, both *Shane* and *Sanjuro* become juxtaposed

against father-figures, functioning as alternative father-figures to the young protagonists. Shane is constantly compared to Joe Starrett by little Joey. For instance, Joey wonders which of the two adults is the better fighter, or which can shoot faster. Little Joey undeniably finds Shane a more attractive model than the more prosaic Joe Starrett (which duplicates the audience's perceptions, partly a function of the casting of Van Heflin opposite Alan Ladd). Similarly, Iiro (Yuzo Kayama), the leader of the young samurai in *Sanjuro*, is quickly won over by the dynamic hero and by the end of the film is ready to forsake his family to accompany the *ronin-hero*. (We do not actually see the father-figure of *Sanjuro*, the clan Chamberlain and Iiro's uncle, until very late in the film. At that time, however, much is made of the physical disparity between the Chamberlain and *Sanjuro*. The latter, of course, is played by Toshiro Mifune, and Japan hardly has a more dynamic actor.) Of equal importance is the fact that both Shane and *Sanjuro* have a healthy respect for the father-figures against whom they are juxtaposed. Shane agrees to work for Joe Starrett because he admires him and respects what he is trying to accomplish. By working together, for instance, the two men are able to uproot a tree trunk that has been plaguing the Starrett farm.<sup>11</sup> At the climax, Shane risks his life to battle the gunman, Wilson, even though Joe insists that he be the one to face him. *Sanjuro*, too, joins the cause of the young samurai because, even though he has never yet met the Chamberlain, he likes the man based upon his reputation. *Sanjuro* and the Chamberlain, although they do not initially know it, work together (albeit separately) to defeat the villains, the Chamberlain stalling for time and *Sanjuro* through more active measures.

The decision by Shane and *Sanjuro* to leave the society after they defeat the villains is similarly based on their respect for the father-figures. Each man knows he has no place in the society he has helped bring about and does not wish to act as a reminder to the father of his heroism. Both Shane and *Sanjuro* know that the youths admire and look up to them. They know that the fathers cannot compete with their heroic image. They leave because by so doing, they restore the father-figure to his rightful place. There is a scene in *Sanjuro* in which all this is made explicit. The Chamberlain expresses to his wife, daughter, and to Iiro how he is grateful that *Sanjuro* left. Such a man, he says, would have been too much for him. It is not that *Sanjuro* would literally have been too much, for *Sanjuro* would hardly rebel against the Chamberlain whom he likes, but that the image of *Sanjuro* would overwhelm that of the Chamberlain. This scene, the penultimate one of *Sanjuro*, redresses this missing scene in *Shane*.<sup>12</sup> It fills in for the Starretts' reaction to learning from little Joey that Shane will not be coming back (a reaction which must take place after the film is over). Marion, who loves Shane (but who loves her husband no less), must be relieved, at least, at Shane's departure.

Both Shane and *Sanjuro*, as heroic characters, take on importance and stature not only in juxtaposition with father-figures, but against outlaw or villain-figures. Both films introduce an antagonist who is related thematically and structurally to the hero. In *Shane*, this character is Wilson (Jack Palance); in *Sanjuro*, it is Muroto Hanbei (Tatsuya Nakadai).

If Starrett is actually opposed to Ryker, the rancher, then Shane is opposed to Wilson, Ryker's hired gun. Similarly, the Chamberlain is opposed to Kikui, the crooked magistrate, and Sanjuro is opposed to Hanbei, the magistrate's hired work. These relationships may be schematized thusly:

Shane: Joe Starrett :: Sanjuro : Chamberlain

Shane: Wilson :: Sanjuro : Hanbei

The outlaw-villains of *Shane* and *Sanjuro* share a kind of kinship with the outlaw-heroes. Shane is certainly aware of Wilson by reputation, while it is likely (if a trifle unclear) that Wilson has heard of Shane. Hanbei recognizes in Sanjuro a kindred spirit. Shane knows that Joe Starrett is no match for Hanbei. Sanjuro's respect for Hanbei is so great, in fact, that he even tries to talk his way out of their duel. It is not that Sanjuro is afraid to die (even if he really is unsure as to what the outcome will be), but rather that the death of one of them would be a tragedy--there are so few real samurai left in the world.

It is significant that the final, inevitable confrontations between hero and opposed villain be witnessed by the youth. Little Joey is thrilled when Shane kills Wilson, as well as the two Ryker brothers. The impressive impact of this final fight stems from Shane's being outnumbered. The final fight in *Sanjuro*, similarly witnessed by the youth, is impressive for the fountain of blood Sanjuro brings forth out of Hanbei. In both cases, the youths are awestruck (and so is the audience of *Sanjuro*). Following the fights, the youngster wants either to have the hero return home with him (*Shane*) or to accompany the hero on his journey (*Sanjuro*). In both cases, the request is denied. The hero sends the youngsters back home. The hero then, watched by the youngsters, heads off into the sunset.

The story pattern and plot structure of *Sanjuro* thus may be seen to fit rather neatly into the pattern of the classical Western. Wright also sees his plot types as possessing a number of basic oppositions apparent in an analysis of the symbolic roles of the different characters (heroes, villains, society's members). The oppositions he isolates in the classical Western are: inside/outside; good/bad; strong/weak; and the fourth, wilderness/civilization, being "perhaps the typically American aspect of the Western."<sup>13</sup> Wright sees the inside/outside opposition as related to, but not identical with, the wilderness/civilization dichotomy. It seems to me that the link between the two oppositions would be strengthened by introducing a third binary pair, namely nomad/settler. This seems to embody both the idea of outside/inside and wilderness/civilization. This dichotomy characterizes both Shane and Sanjuro. They both clearly are outsiders and both are nomads. Shane's links to the wilderness have already been touched upon. Sanjuro's links to the wilderness are more subtle. His introductory associations are with civilization and the whole of the film is concerned with such forces. However, as an outsider, a nomad, Sanjuro, from a Japanese point of view, is clearly not as "civilized" as the rest of society, and much is made of this point (more about this later).

Wright sees the good/bad opposition in *Shane* from the point of view of normative values. The societal insiders possess social, progressive ideals, whereas the outsiders, the villains, hold to selfish economic gain.<sup>14</sup> This good/bad dichotomy is reproduced in *Sanjuro* where the Chamberlain, the

insider, represents harmonious social relations, while the villains seek mere economic gain. This is made explicit when Hanbei tells Sanjuro that once he is in control he will eliminate Kikui and reap the rewards. Shane and Sanjuro are both initially mistrusted by the members of society whom they wish to aid because they are both outsiders. With no moral stake in the formation or maintenance of the community, their motives are suspect.

The strong/weak opposition, according to Wright, aligns the heroes and villains on one side and the society on the other.<sup>15</sup> I have already elucidated the relationship between Sanjuro and Hanbei, which structurally duplicates that between Shane and Wilson. And if the young samurai in *Sanjuro* are somewhat more admirable than the bulk of the farmers in *Shane* in their willingness to fight for their own cause, it does not disguise the fact that without Sanjuro's help they would easily have gone down in quick defeat.

The opposition wilderness/civilization might seem to break down the structural similarities between *Shane* and *Sanjuro*. If we accept Wright's contention that civilization is "a concern with the money, tools, and products of American culture,"<sup>16</sup> then it does indeed end this portion of our discussion. But if we alter the terms of the definition slightly by placing the opposition in the realm of *character* (which is where both films essentially operate), the similarities are again crucial. Shane's "natural" or wilderness attributes are typically noted in discussions of the film. Less frequently commented upon are his cultural attributes. For instances, in the first dinner Shane shares with the Starretts, Marion lays out their best china. Shane thus is understood by Marion to have an understanding of the finer things in (civilized) life. More obviously, at the Fourth of July dance (which is also, appropriately enough, the Starrett's wedding anniversary), it is Shane who dances with Marion. Too, Shane's comment to Marion that a gun is merely a *tool* makes explicit Shane's recognition of culture's ability to tame nature. Shane, like many a Western hero, contains attributes of both the wilderness and civilization within himself. The subversion of his wild side--either by hanging up his gun, by leaving the valley, or by dying--characterizes the typical Western hero.

Sanjuro also balances the forces of nature and culture, as we have seen. In a sense, the samurai sword marks one of civilization's highest achievements, being the finest sword ever forged by man. And if the society in *Shane* marks the struggle between nature, in the form of the rancher Ryker, and culture, in the form of the farmers, the issue in *Sanjuro* is one of too much culture. Although, like Sanjuro, the young samurai wear swords, they really cannot use them. They have been taught to use them, but have never used them in real action. It takes the natural man, Sanjuro, one closer to his roots as a warrior, to rescue the civilized, would-be fighters. And since Sanjuro is unable, or unwilling, to put aside his wild ways, he, too, must leave the new, or rebuilt, society.

It is clear by now, I hope, that by Wright's standards and the ones I have elaborated, *Sanjuro* is something of a remake of *Shane*, a transposition of it in much the same way that *The Magnificent Seven* transposes *Seven Samurai* or *A Fistful of Dollars* is a remake of *Yojimbo*.

Yet the question still remains, is *Sanjuro* a classical Western? By a kind of oral telling, or a written plot synopsis, the two films are almost indistinguishable. Yet *Sanjuro* is not a Western; to say this is almost to say nothing on one level, for *Sanjuro* is obviously not a Western. Simply put, it does not take place in the American West (or a reasonable facsimile thereof). "The element that most clearly defines the Western is the symbolic landscape in which it takes place and the influence this landscape has on the characters and actions of the hero."<sup>17</sup> The Western film is defined as much by John Ford's fabulous vistas of Monument Valley, Anthony Mann's majestic mountains, and Budd Boetticher's barren landscapes as the narrative patterns and character relationships Wright utilizes. *Sanjuro*, to put it simply, cannot be a Western because it does not look like one. Kurosawa is well aware of this fact, however, and puts it to creative use. He places his "Western" in a landscape at the thematic opposite of the wide-open spaces of the West. *Sanjuro*, despite the CinemaScope framing (*Shane* was shot in the then-standard Academy aperture), is Kurosawa's most visually restricted film. Much of it takes place indoors; outdoor locales are almost entirely relegated to spaces defined by buildings--alleys, gardens, streets. Stevens revels in the open spaces of the Grand Tetons, and makes much symbolic use of Marion Starrett's garden (which encapsulates the thematic opposition of wilderness/civilization, of course). Kurosawa revels in the closed spaces of his film. A river, which for Stevens would be a part of the natural landscape, becomes, in *Sanjuro*, a stream connecting two mansions. Landscape is symbolic in *Sanjuro*, but since the landscape is different, so, too, is its metaphoric significance.

It is, in fact, at the level of metaphor and of aesthetics as a sign system that *Sanjuro* diverges from *Shane* and enters into that realm uniquely Japanese which should be prized by Burch. *Sanjuro* manifests the kind of aesthetic foregrounding and intertextuality which Burch prizes so highly, but he has undervalued the film's essentially dialectical construction. We can see the kind of metaphorical and aesthetic foregrounding and the dialectical nature of Kurosawa's strategy by examining a number of codes at work in the two texts.

The first code to be examined is that of names. The titles of both films are also the names of the central characters. This eponymous characterization indicates that the central thrust of both narratives will be on character, on the person so named who gives his name to the film. The names of the characters, as names, already perform a mythicizing function. In the contexts of the films, both "Shane" and "Sanjuro" strengthen the characters' autochthony. When asked his name, the reply is "Call me Shane." (This scene is humorously echoed in *The Magnificent Seven*. Steve McQueen's character, when asked his name, replies, "Make it Vin.") Similarly, Sanjuro, when asked his name, ponders for a moment before, implausibly, arriving at "Sanjuro Tsubaki." But it is this very implausibility of Sanjuro's name versus the quite plausible, although clearly different (i.e., slightly out of the ordinary) name of Shane which points up a subtle difference between the two films. For we must recognize that the two names, Shane and Sanjuro, belong to two different discursive orders.

Shane, as a name, has a metonymic quality. It could be a first name, a last name, or a nickname, but it is a name, and it is *only* a name. It isn't something else. The word *Sanjuro*, on the other hand, actually *means* "thirty years old;" *tsubaki* means "camellias." This is not a translation of the Japanese characters for the lead character's name. It is as if Shane, when asked his name, replied, "Call me Camellias, thirty years old!" Thus, if "Shane" is metonymic, "Sanjuro" is metaphoric.<sup>18</sup> This is to say that Sanjuro, in calling himself something, brings to bear another realm of discourse. (This is an echo from *Yojimbo*, where Mifune's character calls himself "Kuwabatake Sanjuro"--mulberry field, thirty years old. Considering the importance of names in Japanese society, Sanjuro, in making up a name for himself, already positions himself outside of culture. But the specific name establishes links with nature on *two* metaphoric levels [*tsubaki*, plus the self-creation.] Thus, the selection of names for the heroes of the films is one index of the greater sophistication of *Sanjuro* and the manner in which codes of the Western are transposed.

If *Sanjuro's* use of metaphor exceeds that of *Shane's*, it is in the realm of aesthetics, or the foregrounding of a code of aesthetics, where the two films diverge almost completely. Codes, such as "The Code of the West," or "*Bushido*," characterize the ideals encapsulated by Westerns and samurai films. Richie, as I have mentioned, prizes *Sanjuro* for the way in which it points up so much of the hollowness of *Bushido* as practiced in the ordinary *jidai-geki*. But that is not exactly what *Sanjuro* does. Rather, it finds humor in the disjunction between the code in theory and the lack of the code in practice. It is not *Bushido*, or the Code of the West, that comes in for attack. It is the *force* of such a code in operation which Kurosawa examines, the manner in which subscription to a code, to, that is, a *set of significations*, causes human misunderstandings.

The young samurai in *Sanjuro* always have a basic mistrust of the hero, even while they follow and admire him. *Sanjuro* is a *ronin*, an unemployed samurai, which offends their sense of order. Further, he is dirty, grubby, ill-mannered, and gruff. The youngsters see *Sanjuro's* clothes and apparent attitude as an objective correlative, which indeed it is, but his actions do not correlate to what they infer.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of trust on the part of the young samurai becomes a constant source of humor and tension in the film. Their misunderstanding (misreading) of *Sanjuro* leads almost to the defeat of their plans. Their reliance on an objective code of behavior and aesthetics prevents them from seeing the true nature of their would-be rescuer.

The difference in nature between *Sanjuro* and the youngsters is wittily shown by Kurosawa, not only by words and deeds, but by his framing strategies. Kurosawa uses the 'Scope frame to juxtapose the horizontality of *Sanjuro* with the verticality of the samurai. Whereas they always sit upright in true samurai posture, *Sanjuro* likes to sprawl out across the tatami. One montage sequence reveals this quite clearly. Some of the samurai have been sent out as scouts to see what is happening. *Sanjuro* and the rest of them await their reports. As the scouts come in, the young samurai sitting upright listen carefully; in the background, or in the foreground (but never in the

middleground), Sanjuro lies horizontally across the frame, typically yawning and scratching. The difference in posture, emphasized through the framing, is the perfect metaphor for the disjunction between social codes, between deeds and meanings.

There is one person in the film who does, instinctively, understand Sanjuro, and understand the disjunction between social/aesthetic codes, and that is the Chamberlain's wife. When Sanjuro rescues her from her captors, she is distressed to learn that he has had to kill two of them. Sanjuro is nonplussed at her criticism, but accepts it mutely (for him). Then, in order to escape from their compound, they must climb a stone wall. The woman is unable to jump to the top, so Sanjuro offers to act as a footstool. The old woman refuses, claiming it would be "impolite." Indeed it would be impolite, but the invocation of such a social code under the circumstances is a bit absurd. Sanjuro understands her, however, and so reminds her that unless she accepts his offer he will have to kill again. This prospect inspires her to place one aesthetic value before another and over the wall she goes, apologizing all the while for her rudeness.

On the other hand, the old lady's sense of aesthetics is not without a certain legitimacy. We see this in a number of ways. One of them is during the celebration over the discovery of the Chamberlain's place of imprisonment. In the midst of their jumping about, the young samurai notice that their prisoner, who has been kept in a closet, is leaping for joy along with them. When asked why he did not run away, he says it is because the old lady, who had untied his bonds, never thought that he would. At this time they also notice that he is wearing Iiro's best kimono. He tells them the old lady gave it to him because his was dirty.

The Chamberlain's wife introduces into the film the Zen paradox of the "undrawn sword." She reminds Sanjuro that the very best swords remain in their scabbards. She compares him to a drawn sword and would prefer that he were not that way. Such a paradox, that of the best swordsman who never uses his sword, abounds in the Zen annals. The paradox underwrites the film precisely to the extent that an undrawn sword is impossible, both on the narrative level and on the generic level. The swordplay film (*chambara*), however much it pays homage to the aesthetics of Zen, is impossible to conceive of minus swordplay. Kurosawa understands this very well--hence the spectacular "fountain of blood" at the climax.

The Chamberlain's wife at one extreme and Sanjuro at the other represent the linked dichotomy that structures *Sanjuro*. The film is thus to be understood not, like *Shane*, as an inevitable clash between the forces of nature and the forces of culture, but as a struggle between aesthetic and moral systems. At the level of shot composition, narrative conflict, and verbal exchanges, this opposition is elaborated upon. This aesthetic tension replaces the most significant absence in the transition from *Shane* to *Sanjuro*: romantic, or sexual, tension. In both films the father-figures are married. But in *Shane*, Marion Starrett (Jean Arthur) is a sexual being. Much is made, subtly, of the sexual attraction between Shane and Marion. At the end of the film Marion tells Shane not to face up to Wilson

if he is doing it for her. Similarly, Joe Starrett says to Shane that if he (Joe) goes against Wilson and loses, he knows Shane will take care of Marion and little Joey. But in *Sanjuro* there is no such comparable sexual triangle. Joan Mellen notes how *Sanjuro* "introduces a woman who is...a match for the ronin hero...But she is merely a peripheral character, and Kurosawa gives her no name. She is also a woman of late middle age, having long passed the time when she could use her sexuality against men."<sup>20</sup> Although Mellen is wrong about the woman's peripheral status, she is quite right about her lack of sexuality. However, it is not that Kurosawa is anti-romantic (there is sexual by-play between Iiro and the Chamberlain's daughter); rather, that his focus is on aesthetics as a system of beliefs. The Chamberlain's wife may be seen as the dialectical opposite of Sanjuro (much as the Chamberlain himself for whom she stands in during the bulk of the film). If he represents action, she is stasis; he is violent, she, passive. The woman is thus peripheral to the *action* of *Sanjuro*, but central to its structure. Shane leaves so that the sexual triangle he has caused may be broken; Sanjuro leaves because he is a drawn sword in an age of peaceful fighters.

Stevens concludes *Shane* without ambiguities. Shane leaves to keep the family unit whole; the gunfighter has no place in a civilized society; he is a mythological being who returns to the earth whence he was born. Kurosawa concludes *Sanjuro* with ambiguities aplenty. Sanjuro does not disrupt the family unit, only the aesthetic system. But is such a system viable? Sanjuro is a mythological being, but he is not born out of the earth, so his wanderings are more complex than Shane's. Stevens is careful to orchestrate the whole tone of *Shane* so that it reaches a tearful end. Shane, wounded, rides off into the majestic mountains beyond as little Joey calls after him, "Shane...come back Shane...we love you, Shane...Shane." Sanjuro, having sliced open his opponent, is congratulated by the young samurai. The audience, momentarily breathless, is brought to a different mood when Sanjuro says, "Watch out, I'm in a bad mood!" A few moments later, as the young men bow before him, he breaks into a small smile and waves a jaunty, "bye," and saunters (Chaplinsque?) down the road.

*Shane* was an extremely popular film in Japan. But the narrative and structural patterns in *Shane* are neither unique nor original to it. *Shane* may very well be an archetypal Western, but it is hardly the first. Similarly, Kurosawa need not have seen *Shane* to be familiar with both earlier Westerns and earlier *jidai-geki* influenced by Westerns. Kurosawa's affinity for the films of John Ford and his own claim to have been influenced by the works of Hawks and Stevens should not make common connections too surprising. The popular appeal of *Shane* in Japan and America, and the popularity of *Sanjuro* in America and Japan demonstrate the appeal of their mythic content to both cultures. But the differences between the films may be said to rest precisely on *Sanjuro*'s Japaneseness, on the manner in which Kurosawa could structure a film around the clash of aesthetic systems. That *Sanjuro* could seem merely a Western to a critic as perceptive as Noël Burch, or could seem simply a spoof of *chambara* films to a writer as knowledgeable as Donald Richie, demonstrates the work needed to be done to bring theoretical and critical specificity to notions of "Eastern" and "Western."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Donald Richie's publications in the Japanese cinema are numerous. They include *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1971); *The Japanese Movie*, rev. ed. (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1981); *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), among others. Noël Burch's major publication is *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>Burch, p. 318.

<sup>3</sup>Burch, p. 332.

<sup>4</sup>Burch, p. 318-9.

<sup>5</sup>Burch also undervalues *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo*, which, along with *Sanjuro*, are possibly Kurosawa's most popular films in America. Is this a coincidence?

<sup>6</sup>Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup>Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

<sup>8</sup>Wright, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup>Wright, pp. 48-9.

<sup>10</sup>*Japan: Film Image* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), pp. 82-4.

<sup>11</sup>The tree trunk episode is downplayed in the film. Its symbolic weight comes through more clearly in the novel by Jack Schaefer.

<sup>12</sup>The idea of redressing an absence in an intertextual fashion in the cinema occurred to me when Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader introduced the "Scar" scene in *Taxi Driver*, their loosely adapted version of *The Searchers*.

<sup>13</sup>Wright, p. 49.

<sup>14</sup>Wright, p. 52.

<sup>15</sup>Wright, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup>Wright, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup>John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories at Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 193.

<sup>18</sup>This discussion of names was inspired by Claude Levi-Strauss' discussion of the names we give pets in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 194-216.

<sup>19</sup>This is similar to points raised by Richie in *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, pp. 160, 162.

<sup>20</sup>Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan Through Its Cinema* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), pp. 52-3.

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