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Far East on Film

Rich Johnson

Week 7

SAMURAI & YAKUZA

Films by way of the warrior and the art of war have, over the years, showcased very specific and unique acts of violence. This session will not only look at the intricate details played out within samurai movies – from motion to atmosphere – but also a reminder of the major filmmakers associated with this subgenre who have become some of the most influential directors of all time. Post-war, how have samurai movies also evolved into yakuza movies? A sub-genre that became more prominent during the '70s.

Main films:

Japan

Yojimbo (1961)

Director(s): Akira Kurosawa

Studio(s): Kurosawa Production Co. / Sammy / Toho Company

Harakiri (1962)

Director(s): Masaki Kobayashi

Studio(s): Shochiko

Lone Wolf and Cub aka: *Sword of Vengeance / The Babycart series* (1972-1974)

Director(s): Kenji Misumi, Buichi Saitō, Kenji Misumi, Yoshiyuki Kuroda

Studio(s): Katsu

Lone Wolf and Cub: Sword of Vengeance (1972)

Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart at the River Styx (1972)

Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart to Hades (1972)

Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart in Peril (1972)

Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart in the Land of Demons (1973)

Lone Wolf and Cub: White Heaven in Hell (1974)



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Shogun Assassin (1980)

First two films reedited together

Lady Snowblood (1973)

Director(s): Toshiya Fujita

Studio(s): Tokyo Eiga

The Twilight Samurai (2002)

Director(s): Yôji Yamada

Studio(s): Eisei Gekijo / Hakuhodo / Nippon Shuppan Hanbai (Nippan) K.K. / Nippon TV / Shochiku / Sumitomo Corporation

The Hidden Blade (2004)

Director(s): Yôji Yamada

Studio(s): Eisei Gekijo / Hakuhodo / Nippon Shuppan Hanbai (Nippan) K.K. / Nippon TV / Shochiku / Sumitomo Corporation

Stray Dog (1949)

Director(s): Akira Kurosawa

Studio(s): Shintoho / Film Art Association

Tokyo Drifter (1966)

Director(s): Seijun Suzuki

Studio(s): Shintoho / Film Art Association

Battles Without Honor and Humanity (1973)

Director(s): Kinji Fukasaku

Studio(s): Toei Company

Notes:

The samurai (or bushi): warriors of pre-modern Japan who eventually made up the ruling military class becoming the highest-ranking social caste of the Edo Period (1603-1867). Ronin (masterless samurai) are often seen as the loner/roaming characters... the outlaws...

Kurosawa stated the 1942 film noir classic *The Glass Key*, an adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's 1931 novel *The Glass Key*, was an influence. Although some critics over the years say it is coincidental, the overall plot of *Yojimbo* is closer to Hammett's other novel, *Red Harvest* (1929) There is also a sequel, *Sanjuro* (1962),

Physical releases: available on US Criterion and BFI.

Production company, Toho, filed a lawsuit but Leone ignored it resulting in him eventually having to settle out of court, reportedly for 15% of the worldwide receipts of *A Fistful of Dollars* and over \$100,000 in charges.



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The Seven Samurai (1954) is arguably Kurosawa's most highly regarded film and the most influential.

Kurosawa's style is always about capturing the movement and atmosphere in the quietest of moments. A flag blowing in the wind, an elegant poise, the dynamics of the framing and camera movements.

The Magnificent Seven (1960) is a remake of *The Seven Samurai* (1954).

Rashomon (1950 – or the 'Rashomon effect' – an influence on *The Usual Suspects* (1995).

Star Wars (1977) hugely influenced by Kurosawa, specifically *The Hidden Fortress* (1958).

They worked on 16 films together but, sadly, *Red Beard* (1965) was to be their last. This was due to several factors: Kurosawa was famous for 'monopolizing' crew and actors; ruthlessly dropping those he no longer needed. As part of the neglected crew over the years, it didn't help Mifune having an expensive lifestyle and needing extra money which led him to work on what Kurosawa deemed 'inferior' movies and, therefore, he felt 'betrayed'.

Starring another key leading star of Japan, Tatsuya Nakadai and directed by Masaki Kobayashi (*Kwaidan*). Centred around the brutal suicide of a ronin that is investigated by his father-in-law. It is both an excellent drama and exciting, intriguing samurai tale.

For this reason the film fits perfectly into one of two genres: the 'jidai-geki' genre which means 'period drama'; films that are usually set during the Edo Period of Japanese history and 'chanbara' (sword fighting film).

Available on Eureka Entertainment's Masters of Cinema series.

'Seppuku' and 'harakiri' both mean to commit ritual suicide in Japanese. Seppuku is the formal term, derived from the kanji characters for "hara" (belly) and "kiri" (cut); harakiri is considered the cruder, less polite term for this act.

Actor Tatsuya Nakadai was afraid during most of the combat scenes because real swords were being used with professional swordsmen. This is (obviously!) now forbidden in Japanese filmmaking.

Audition director, Takashi Miike, remade the film as *Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai* (2011) and is also worth a watch.

The *Lone Wolf and Cub* series of movies – also known as *The Baby Cart* or *Sword of Vengeance* series - often fall into areas of exploitation cinema but are genuine classics of the genre.



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The films were most well known to the West as *Shogun Assassin* (1980). This release was in fact the first two films reedited and marketed amongst the wave of ‘sword & sorcery’ movies.

Available via Criterion UK.

Based on the manga by writer Kazuo Koike and artist Goseki Kojima running from 1970 to 1976.

It is, hands down, one of the greatest pieces of Japanese literature let alone ‘comic book’; a detailed mix of Japanese history, language, incredible pacing and action sequences. It is graphic, in every sense of the word.

Perfect female counterpart to the *Lone Wolf and Cub* films. Also based on based on the manga series of the same writer, Kazuo Koike, and artist Kazuo Kamimura

Perfect vehicle for Japanese singer/actress Meiko Kaji. Since the 1960s, she has appeared in over 100 film and television roles; defining female outlaw roles throughout the '70s in notable film series *Stray Cat Rock* (1970-1971), *Wandering Ginza Butterfly* (1972) and *Female Prisoner 701: Scorpion* (1972-1976).

Available on Arrow Video and Criterion US.

Lone Wolf and Cub, *Lady Snowblood* are just a couple of examples of the vast influence samurai and martial art movies had on Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* films.

Directed by Yôji Yamada and starring Hiroyuki Sanada.

Official Japanese submission for the 'Best Foreign Language Film' category of the 76th Academy Awards in 2004.

Won an unprecedented 12 Japanese Academy Awards, including: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay.

Hiroyuki Sanada is one of Japan’s most well known actors and martial artists working today. As well as *The Twilight Samurai* and *Ring* (1998) he has been seen in *The Last Samurai* (2003) with Tom Cruise, Danny Boyle’s *Sunshine* (2007), *The Railway Man* (2013) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).

Forms part of Yamada’s ‘Samurai Trilogy’. These include *The Hidden Blade* (2004) and *Love and Honor* (2006).

The Yakuza have often adopted samurai rituals that includes the infamous tattoos on their bodies. This, again, represents the importance of having a ‘code of honor’. Ironically, the yakuza were enemies with the samurai early on in Japanese history. The tattoos are often a personal depiction of a scene from the yakuza member's life or something (symbolically) important to them. This displays what each individual member is known for.



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Stray Dog (1949) is a classic early Kurosawa noir. There is a semi-documentary style about it, which is incredibly advanced for its time.

A BFI release. One that is certainly worth screening due to how pricey it is on physical media and hard to find via streaming.

Such a simple plot and window into Tokyo's post-war netherworld as we witness the psychological breakdown of a rookie policeman searching for his lost gun.

There is a remarkable eight and half-minute sequence shot by Godzilla director Ishiro Honda who worked as an assistant director on the film.

Superbly framed; the film also, in true Kurosawa fashion – captures the dynamics and (heated) atmosphere of the narrative *and* environment.

Director Seijun Suzuki (1923-2017) was known for his jarring visual style and nihilism. After making predominately B-movies (over 40 in total) for the Nikkatsu Company between 1956 and 1967 he went on to work prolifically in the yakuza genre. His increasingly surreal style led to his dismissal after what is often regarded as his 'magnum opus', *Branded to Kill* (1967),

Available on Criterion UK.

The colourful style of *Tokyo Drifter* (1966) is reminiscent of modern anime. This use of highly-stylised colour including a black and white transition to colour reminiscent of Tarantino's *Kill Bill* opening which is an obvious homage to the film.

Battles Without Honor and Humanity (1973) was known to the West as *The Yakuza Papers*.

Inspired by a series of magazine articles by journalist Kōichi Iiboshi. They are based on memoirs written by real-life yakuza Kōzō Minō.

Available on Arrow Video. There are five films in the series:

Battles Without Honor and Humanity (1973)
Battles Without Honor and Humanity: Deadly Fight in Hiroshima (1973)
Battles Without Honor and Humanity: Proxy War (1973)
Battles Without Honor and Humanity: Police Tactics (1974)
Battles Without Honor and Humanity: Final Episode (1974)

Also the *New Battles Without Honor and Humanity* series:

New Battles Without Honor and Humanity: The Boss's Head (1975)
New Battles Without Honor and Humanity: Last Days of the Boss (1976)
Aftermath of Battles Without Honor and Humanity (1979)
New Battles Without Honor and Humanity (2000)
New Battles Without Honor and Humanity/Murder (2003)



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Director Fukasaku drew on his own experiences as a child during World War II; at fifteen he working with other children in a munitions factory that was regularly bombed.

Part of the film series' success is down to the zeitgeist of '70s Japan as economic growth was at its peak and at the end of the '60s with student uprisings having taken place; young people who had similar feelings to those of the post-war society depicted in the films.

The success of the series popularized the subgenre of yakuza film called 'Jitsuroku eiga' ('actual record films'). These often depicted events based on true stories. Pre-war Yakuza stories/films were known as 'Ninkyō eiga' ('chivalry films').

It is no surprise that the series is referred to a 'The Japanese Godfather'.