

Elements of Mise-en-scène in Akira Kurosawa's "Yojimbo"

In Akira Kurosawa's "Yojimbo", a ronin wanders through the Japanese countryside and ends up in a town where he involves himself in the conflicts of two clans. He is introduced to the clans of Ushitora and Seibaei by Gonji, the owner of a small izakaya. Sanjuro decides to earn money as bodyguards of either clan. His interventions cause the clans to kidnap innocent people and the burning and destruction of both clan's property. Sanjuro's benevolence saves a kidnapped wife and gets him caught and captured by Ushitora. Sanjuro escapes with Gonji's help and witnesses Ushitora execute Seibei's entire family and his clan. Finally, he returns to save a captured Gonji and murders Ushitora, his men and Unosuke. The scene I have chosen to analyze is the exchange between Nui and Yoichiro. It begins with the confrontation between Seibei and Ushitora's clan. A man from each side slowly brings their hostage over by rope. Nui's true husband, Kohei and her son, Kendo, spectate from inside the izakaya when Kendo calls out to his mom. Nui hears Kendo and wildly chases after him, deranging the exchange. Both clans frantically exchange the two ropes and retreat to their clan.

In the beginning of the scene, the natural light of the morning diffusing over both clans, causing minimal shadows, makes it apparent that about a day had passed since the previous scene, and establishes the newly formed tension instigated by Sanjuro. Inside the izakaya, soft light is cast on Sanjuro, Gonji, and Nui's family to soften details and reduce shadows, which asserts a lighter moment as the film focuses on the suspense of the exchange. When the two escorts meet in front of the izakaya, natural light becomes a source of hard light as shadows become defined on the left side of both escorts' faces and kimonos. This complies with the climax of the exchange as both

sides frantically swap ropes, of which the details their facial expressions are focused on. The combination of Yoichiro's escort's facial expressions, the playful background music and the awful acting of both escorts emphasizes the fact that the whole exchange scene is depicted as immature and comical.

The costumes make it is easy to recognize important details of the scene. The individual characters can be identified without necessarily showing their faces because they were consistent with their costumes across the film. For example, Ushitora wears white robes with a distinct design over his dark kimono. Seibei wears striped robes over his striped kimono with both having a similar color value. Interestingly, the two escorts of the hostages wear an kimonos identical to Sanjuro, suggesting they may also be ronins. Moreover, the time period can be identified from the men's haircuts. Almost all the actors, excluding a few such as the actors of Sanjuro and Unosuke, look like they are wearing bald caps to represent the chonmage haircut for that time period. It indicates that the film was set in the Edo-period, where samurai would shave parts of their top and pull their hair into a ponytail, to either secure their helmets or symbolize a warrior (Schwartz, 2016).

The staging of the characters in each shot creates balance and provides underlying details of the scene. Every major shot follows the rule of thirds. The shot in the izakaya where Sanjuro, Gonji, Kendo and Kohei are watching achieves the effect that Kohei is separated from the former three. The three are positioned to the left, Kohei is positioned to the far right, and in the center a long wooden table divides the two. In the shots of both clans' sides, every significant character of the clan is distributed evenly across quadrants of the frame. For Ushitora's side, two significant characters are divided across the left and right, while Yuichiro and his escort are positioned in the center. Similarly, Seibei and his wife are standing on the far left and right side of the frame respectively, while Nui and her escort stay in the center. These arrangements of characters achieve visual order. Finally, the shot of the meeting of the two escorts

contain at least one character per quadrant. From left to right, there is Nui hugging her family, Yoichiro's escort staring at the other escort, Nui's escort trying to pull Nui away, and Yoichiro waiting to be untangled. The beginning of this shot also applies dynamic composition in the sense that the lines of different characters running toward Nui route various directions. The tracking shots of Nui running to her son and Yoichiro running back to his mother contains lead room in the direction of them running. It creates the illusion that Nui broke free. Before the scene ends, Ushitora, Unosuke and Inokichi are arranged at the center of the frame and positioned closer to the camera, clearly distant from their hired men. However, Seibei's family appears also at the center but much closer to their men. This emphasizes focus on the Ushitora trio as they rise into more dangerous characters after that scene. In fact, the scene ends with Unosuke firing his gun at the sky in intimidation.

The lighting, staging, costume and make-up, and the acting in this scene of Yojimbo contributed to maximizing the emotion, tension, and energy that it wanted to induce on the viewer. The lighting successfully highlighted important gestures and facial expressions of the scene's main characters. The scene's staging applied film techniques to create visual order and satisfy visual expectations. The costume and make-up provided consistency across characters and subsidiary details of the film that more knowledgeable viewers would recognize. Ultimately, it was a compelling scene.

References

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