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### The Sword (of Doom) Film

The 'samurai film' is a complex genre that refers to a diverse selection of movies, with diverging narratives, styles, and interpretive meanings. Okamoto Kihachi's *The Sword of Doom* (1966) is one such film. We follow Ryunosuke Tsukue, an amoral ronin, who murders with little discrimination and is virtually unmatched in skill. He flees his hometown after raping a clansman's wife and murdering him in a duel. He continues living as a 'sword of doom,' and joins a political assassination gang. Ultimately, he must confront his actions, but he instead enters a murderous rampage. In this essay, I will argue that *The Sword of Doom* is a 'sword film' according to the definition proposed by David Desser in his article "*Toward a structural analysis of the postwar samurai film*," though it deviates from the plot. This is supported by how the film portrays violence and engages with interpretative ideas. This classification is emblematic of a shift away from anti-feudal narratives into ones that more cynically portray the world as well as a shift to films that serve primarily as entertainment and spectacle.

In his article "*Toward a structural analysis of the postwar samurai film*," David Desser subdivides the monolithic 'samurai film' from the postwar era into four categories. He explains the *nostalgic samurai drama*, the *anti-feudal film*, the *zen fighters* genre, and the *sword film*. All of these appeal both to specific post-war sentiments in Japan and to broader cultural ideals. For instance, when explaining the nostalgic samurai drama, Desser introduces the idea of *mono no aware*, or "sweet sadness," which is supposed to capture that bittersweet sentiment one feels when they contemplate life, its futility, and its beauty. Of importance for *The Sword of Doom* is the *Sword Film*. Desser describes this film as one that is highly formulaic, priding spectacle over

originality. The world is often dark, populated with meaningless death and cynicism, and culminates in a spectacular bloodbath. *The Sword of Doom* synergizes with this depiction of genre as it is driven by its dramatization of death, drawn out battles with unobtrusive editing, and a protagonist who has all of the samurai's skills and none of their principles.

Genres are subjective, and do not need to follow rigid conventions. It follows, then, that because an argument can be made that *The Sword of Doom* is a sword film does not mean that the film has to be restricted by the provided definition. In fact, two major thematic ideas can potentially be drawn from the film. The first is the internal struggle unique to samurai known as *giri/ninjo*, which refers to the conflict of duty and human emotion (as summarized by Desser). There are several references to the concept of duty in *The Sword of Doom*. Arguably one of the most prominent occurs in the mill scene, when Ryunosuke explains to Hama the "duty" of a man to fight honorably in a duel when she asks him to throw the match between him and her husband, sparing his honor. One of the biggest emotional moments we see out of Ryunosuke is when he references his father, and how he wishes to return to his hometown and check on his health. As the story progresses, Ryunosuke forms a family of his own, which he has to be present for. He also begins doing jobs on behalf of the Shogunate; the need of a ronin to put his skills to use, and finding that opportunity primarily in service to the governmental system which justifies the samurai's existence calls to question what duty Ryunosuke has to the Shogunate as a Ronin. He must also contend with whether his 'duty' to this line of work is more important than his humanity. On the subject of humanity, we are able to get mere suggestions of Ryunosuke's emotional side when he is at home and relatively isolated, opening up to his now wife, Hama.

Another major theme that can be extrapolated from this film is the idea of morality and what it entails for someone like Ryunosuke, who is, at the very least, apathetic and indifferent

towards human life. The very first scene in the film is that of a humble aging pilgrim asking to be granted death so that he may not be a burden to his granddaughter. Ryunosuke approaches, and grants him this death. He even states “Look to the west,” a phrasing that is synonymous with an honorable death. Some might argue that this was a morally good thing to do, since the old man wished for it; others might counter that it was morally wrong, since the man began to plead when confronted with what he wished for. Throughout the film, we watch as Ryunosuke’s compass turns more and more towards evil as his actions culminate. He forces himself on a woman, and justifies this as being fair since Hama (the woman in question) is asking him to go against his ‘duty’ of an honest match., stating that “a swordsman prizes his skill like a woman prizes her chastity.” Ryunosuke’s morality is challenged when confronted with a real threat to his skill, a master samurai who expertly dispatches the rest of his crew and then indirectly admonishes him for being morally corrupt and exercising that through his blade. Finally, the culminating scene is ignited through Ryunosuke having to literally confront his demons in the forms of the shadows of those who he has wronged, taunting him in a supposedly haunted room. The ending fight scene can also be argued as a form of atonement, depending on the morality of the assassins.

Evidently, there are many ideas that can be explored within this film, but these do not seem to be what the film is interested in showcasing to the audience. This is evident through the attitudes and actions of our protagonist. Ryunosuke stands as a ronin, a role that historically craves a purpose of some kind in which they might be able to use their skills, only years before the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the very body that justifies the samurai social class. His character is the one through which any meaningful statement about the time period should be made, but the portrayal of his character does not support this reading. He never directly engages with the political and societal setting in which the movie is set. In general, Ryunosuke is a

disinterested agent in this film. He is a reactive creature; this is most evident in his duel with Bunnojo Utsugi. True to his word with Hama, Ryunosuke does not strike down Bunnojo in the fight. In fact, he waits in vain for Bunnojo to make a move. His staff is pointed low to the ground, clearly engaged in the fight but not interested in striking, and he mirrors Bunnojo's moves. When the master calls a draw and Bunnojo attempts an illegal *tsuki* thrust, only then does Ryunosuke swiftly strike him on the head, purportedly in self defense. This slight move is enough to end Bunnojo's life.

The movie, thematically, is also not interested in answering the above ideas of *giri/ninjo* and morality, as Ryunosuke shows little inclination to either ideology. To whom his duty lies is constantly in flux; his only explicit tie is to his sword, as he himself states. He shunts the ties to his former school by disgracing Bunnojo in the duel, fleeing, and executing members of the school who wished to get vengeance. He shows no loyalty to his supposed ideals as a former samurai by failing to honor the duel for vengeance with the other Utsugi brother, abandoning the duel entirely. His relationship with his father is left unexplored.

The most significant rejection of thematic importance is the handling of the final scene. Ryunosuke is confronted with a living symbol of his violence, and then begins to see representations of those whom he has cut down. This confrontation should be where he acknowledges his misgivings and attempts to atone for them. Instead, Ryunosuke destroys the room, maims dozens of assassins, and then approaches the camera, swinging desperately before the image ends on a still, his face contorted in agony. The film has been building up this scene all along. By slowly removing his moral balances, such as his father, his family, and his clansmen, Ryunosuke has nothing left on which to orient his actions. He is freed to act as he wishes.

The cinematography supports this idea of the rejection of higher thematic significance by leaning so heavily into the spectacle of combat. All of the fight scenes are shot in long, continuous takes. The tricks seen in films like King Hu's *Come Drink With Me* (1966), released in the same year, that attempt to create the illusion of faster-than-sight martial arts prowess are nearly absent in this film. Partial obscuring of strikes make it easier to believe that we are watching a real sword fight, but the camera does not shy away from Ryunosuke while he is taking on several opponents. The fights are also considerably long, with the final scene comprising ten straight minutes of swordplay and rage. Another thing of note is that the fight scenes are when our protagonist seems most alive. In these tense moments, we get many closeups of Ryunosuke's face. He stares straight into the camera, acknowledging it. He engages with the viewer most actively when he slashes toward the camera at the end. This contrasts heavily with the medium-close framing that we see when Ryunosuke is at home, with Hama and Ikutaro (his son) in the distance. His gaze is also distant; his eyes are glazed over and he barely moves. This is often paired with a cup of sake, which elicits slightly more emotion.

*The Sword of Doom* is an interesting subversion of the samurai film. It maintains many of the components of the more traditional story, but it centers the story around what would be considered the villain in any other story. Through Ryunosuke, we as the audience are able to get a real taste of the bleak world in which he lives. By having no outlet for his skills, he created his own. The narrative's lack of interest in understanding Ryunosuke as a person, and instead observing him as he executes his martial arts distance the viewer from those otherwise highly explorable themes. The film's presentation of this as unbridled spectacle makes this film an exceptional sword film.

- giri/ninjo falls flat: he does not choose ninjo bc he is selfish, he does not choose giri bc is selfish
- Ryu acts as a stand in, refuses to engage with much of society
- Disinterested agent
- End stuff
- Because ryu no longer has any moral balance in his life, it is easier for him to exact violence

[qualification: what someone would argue and why it falls short?]

Conclusion: what is broader significance of it being a sword film? – cultural context.

Emblematic of a shift from anti-feudal to general entertainment.

Write 10 paragraphs. (bc it's five pages)

“Every conflict is either created by or ended through someone's death, with any intermediary steps involving running away”

- Ryunosuke's first kill in the movie is reintroduced as a problem at the end of the film; sets off a fight scene where he kills dozens of fellow assassins
- Kills Ongatsu(?) which sets off his brother to pursue him
- Also creates the problem of having to 'deal with' Hama
- Joins an assassin's police force to make money to support family; this puts him in deeper shit and introduces further scenarios where he must kill to survive

"This is supported by the cinematography"

- Ryunosuke's fights are often long, tracking shots, from multiple angles.
- Audience always has a pretty clear idea of what is happening at any given moment, and sees him attacking his opponents.
- Even if it isn't believable, it is entertaining to see him expertly deal with severe outnumbering.
- There are only one or two scenes where the editing creates the impression of a faster-than-sight move, and this is for the one move that is supposedly able to beat Ryunosuke. It is not visible. He is unstoppable (in our eyes)
- Lack of music

"Strong internal conflict/allusions to total insanity as the movie progresses"

- Increasingly having to deal with the ramifications of his actions
- Kills Hama (admittedly by request, but he also has to deal with the ruining of her life, and the abandonment of his son's)
- The death of his father, how his final words were to his opponent, wishing for his downfall [this is significant because his father was the main thing grounding him]
- The dependence on alcohol, drowning sorrows and shutting the world out

- Shimada “The sword is the soul. Evil mind, evil soul.”
    - In effect, Ryunosuke IS the sword of doom. He does not have a magical weapon or ungodly abilities, he is just a menace with near-unparalleled skills
    - Further emphasized by aforementioned points, the few moments that we get to see him as a person are fleeting, and uncomfortable. He just stares blankly, and alludes to killing whoever is in his way
  - The movie removing these moral balances from Ryunosuke’s life (family, clansmen, status in society) make it easier for him to exact his bloodlust, and for us to watch
- “Movie’s climax is not primarily concerned with resolving this glaring moral dilemma”
- Ryunosuke is literally confronted with his demons. His greatest opponent (himself) bests him, and he snaps, envisioning everyone he has killed
  - The ‘atonement’ in having to confront those who he has wronged
    - But he is also trying to ‘kill’ their ghosts
  - The ‘atonement’ in killing many, many assassins in this psychotic rampage
    - But it is ambiguous as to whether they are ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ we never learn
  - Ultimately, if this scene resolves anything, it is incidental. The primary purpose of this final fight is showcase a fight
  - Further support by the ending, which literally leaves Ryunosuke’s fate, his state of mind, his atonement, everything unresolved. There is no burden on the movie or on the audience to know this. We are expected to take in the spectacle and enjoy the show
    - AND BECAUSE there is no moral burden on the audience, they are able to do so. They do not have to confront the morality of the protagonist because he is never painted as a hero. They just get to watch guilt free as he does whatever he wishes



- Parallels to *bushido* (and lack thereof. There is no moral code that Ryu works with)

“Parallel’s to mono no aware (desser)”

- The futility of life (because life is so bleak, what is the point in doing anything?)
- The sweet sadness comes if you attempt to empathize with Ryu,
- Ultimately a ‘cheap, consumable’ sword film because it speaks more to people’s repressed instincts of violence and lashing out.
- The futility of the samurai as a being (talk about shogunate falling right around this time, it can be read as samurai lashing out in final attempt to remain in existence)

## Midterm Ideas

—Prompt—

For the first paper for this class, you are asked to do an analysis of a martial arts film. Given what we have discussed in class and the readings we have done,

- how does the film you are analyzing fit in the category of the martial arts film,
  - narratively, Cinematically, iconographically, or historically?
- If you have a definition of the martial arts film (jidaigeki), how does the film fit (or not fit) in that?
- Working with our readings will be important in this paper, but
- central will be your ability to apply or critically relate the readings to the film you choose.

Your main goal is to

- view the film closely and
- compose an analysis of it, trying to understand its structures and significance.
- I recommend close attention to cinematic processes and not just to plot and character.
- Also pay attention to the film’s relations to its cultural, industrial, and political context,
  - but avoid drowning the specificity of the text in broad contextual generalizations.

—End Prompt—

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~~The point of *The Sword of Doom* is that the movie is not saying anything. Though the film sets up an interesting dynamic of a sociopathic samurai who is virtually unstoppable, and places him in the final years of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Ryunosuke, in his actions, is both unwilling and unable to engage in the ‘mortality’ of his social standing. This is emphasized by the film’s~~

~~conclusion (the lack thereof). The film ends in a blur of violence, and Ryunosuke's fate—as well as the fate of the samurai in this bleak world—are left ambiguous. The audience is not meant to engage with why he commits the actions he does. Instead they are meant to enjoy the completely unhinged swordplay.~~

Thesis: *The Sword of Doom* is a “sword film” as described by Desser. Many of the narrative or moral conflicts presented are one-dimensional, and instead of being solved according to moral codes or character development, every major problem in this movie is solved via the death of someone.

[What is the plot of sword of doom? What is a sword film? (film meant for the masses, no broader meanings).] In this essay I will argue that .”Sword of Doom” is a typical example of a “sword film,” based on how it deals with death and conflict resolution. Emblematic of a shift from anti-feudal to just general entertainment

[here is where there could be deeper themes]

[here is where there is none. / emphasis on spectacle]