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JOSEPH L. ANDERSON

When the Twain Meet: Hollywood's Remake of *The Seven Samurai*

Fidelity to an original source is never in itself a criterion for judgment of a motion picture. What is important is the nature and purpose of any changes. In this instance many significant changes stem from traditional Hollywood ways of seeing things, and comparing *The Magnificent Seven* with Kurosawa's film reveals some of the fixed ideas that inhibit American filmmaking.

Both films build from the same basic plot. The peasants of an isolated village decide, in desperation, to resist the bandits who have periodically looted them. Because they have no arms or fighting skills, the Japanese villagers go to a crossroads town to hire masterless samurai; the Mexicans cross the Rio Grande to recruit idle American gunmen. Both peasant groups first find a man capable of leading their resistance. When he has enlisted six more of his kind, they move to the village to organize its defense. During this time the peasants and their retainers are uneasy with each other until the bandit attacks unite them in common effort. When the violence ends in victory, the peasants return to their everyday chores. The surviving professionals go off with their guns and swords again for hire. (One survivor of *The Magnificent Seven*, a young would-be gunman of peasant origin, joins his local girl-friend in the fields.)

Now what do the two films draw from this plot? Despite an avowed reliance on Western Union for message transmission, Hollywood usually squeezes a moralizing conclusion out of everything it touches. Reduced to its essence

and ten words, the message is that the reward for goodness is success, and for evil, failure. This is a pleasant, familiar, and inane conclusion which audiences happily accept.

Because Hollywood films are seldom more than disguised morality plays and because the gunmen of *The Magnificent Seven* follow a calling that may be morally suspect, the script must establish their inherent goodness if any are to triumph at the end. There a number of ploys suitable for this task. William Roberts, the scenarist of *The Magnificent Seven*, chose the most current: social consciousness. Before the good peasants can sign him up, Chris, the gunman leader (Yul Brynner), must reveal his social conscience. In fact, his social conscience must be extra strong if the writer is to "lick" the difficult premise that Chris and six other Yankee gun-fighters will go out of their way to defend Mexicans. Hence, in the sequence which introduces Chris, he is revealed as a prototypical CORE-member who, uneasy over segregation of corpses in Boot Hill, uses his gun-slinging talents to stage a bury-in for a dead Indian. Although the lesser six of the story participate in the subsequent venture for other reasons—most of these are motives more individual and valid than their leader's—they grab for Chris' ideals when their own selfish reasons fail.

Kurosawa's warriors sign with the peasants to satisfy more immediate needs: they are hungry. The job provides room and board for several weeks. Kambei (Takashi Shimura), who becomes the samurai leader, does rescue a baby

from a kidnapper when we first see him. Although a baby in distress is a sentimental Kurosawa cliché, Kambei's act is not milked for meaning. It is largely gratuitous, an immediate response made without soul-searching. Perhaps it has "deeper" connotation; Kurosawa lets the audience decide. As elsewhere in his film, what is more important than the reason why a man acts is the fact that he does act.

But Hollywood scripture requires all characterization to be established without ambiguity. This definition of character is made primarily through each person's spelling out what he wants out of life or, more accurately, out of the period encompassed by the picture. This must be followed with a definite pay-off for each announced goal. Before the final fade-out we must be able to answer the question: did these people get what they wanted or didn't they?

This explicit, verbal definition of character requires expositional dialogue in the manner of the traditional theater. Through conversation or in disguised soliloquy, each character reveals himself or others. The people in *The Magnificent Seven* do this to excess. Black-gloved and troubled Lee (Robert Vaughn) is forever asking for release from a tormenting conscience. Cynical Harry (Brad Dexter) questions everyone about a hidden treasure which he believes is the real objective of the expedition. When even the lesser peasants come on about themselves at length, one wishes the damn Mexicans

would learn to speak Spanish.

But Sturges and Roberts are not content to leave their people as over-articulate individuals. Each character must also express a capsule philosophy which makes him less of an individual and more of a personification of a familiar point of view. For instance, Harry, the treasure-seeker, becomes the materialist objection to social conscience.

Because of a Hollywood inclination to set all conflict in direct personal terms, the bandit leader (Eli Wallach) in the American film confronts the villagers and gunmen in dialogue scenes which reveal his goals in obvious terms. He too must bear a philosophical burden in order to be set up as a personification of evil.

In *The Seven Samurai*, the bandit leader and his men are never seen close up, let alone heard. Kurosawa depersonalizes them: they become as uncommunicative and as incapable of compromise as a flood or typhoon. Almost equivalent to the destructive forces of nature, these Japanese bandits are not so much evil as amoral.

Following a preference for protagonists and antagonists who can ultimately be refined into their essential goodness and badness, the Hollywood plot again diverges from the Japanese after the first bandit attack. The seven gunmen are ambushed upon their return to the village after futile pursuit of the enemy. In the absence of their American cadre, the courage of the Mexicans faltered. They sold out. Better bled than dead. When their professional pride is offended by the bandits' offer to release them if they leave Mexico immediately, the gunmen decide to fight their way out. The peasants rejoin their allies in time to redeem their goodness through valor.

In the equivalent episode of Kurosawa's picture (it occurs before the first bandit attack), the samurai discover that the peasants have a hidden collection of armor. The only way they could have acquired this was by murdering wounded samurai after a near-by battle. Sometime in the past, the peasants have killed for the same reason as the bandits. With this discovery, neither of the opposing forces can now be mis-



THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

taken for a representative of good or evil. The fighting can begin without implied moral advantage. The only thing the defenders have left is their humanity.

But even this is suspect, for one of Kurosawa's major themes could have been borrowed from Kierkegaard's "people talk about man as a social animal; at the bottom man is a beast of prey, and the evidence for this is not confined to the shape of his teeth." As in *Rashomon* and *The Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa expresses this theme through a kind of reverse anthropomorphism in which men take on the attributes of animals. The savagery of the fighting and Kurosawa's devotion to it make this immediately apparent.

Deemphasis of dialogue is another way he achieves this animal accent. Occasionally he relies on speech to establish situations and to set up quick characterization but he takes every opportunity to accomplish these tasks through physical action or other visual description. Indeed, what little speech there is in *The Seven Samurai* often serves a nonverbal function—the emotional overtones of the words spoken are more important than their literal meaning. Dialogue becomes a sound effect.

This use of speech as a sound abstraction cannot be fully experienced by a foreign audience depending on subtitles which translate jabber into printed, clear English. This distorts Kurosawa's intention. It gives speech a literary purpose where none is intended. Subtitles may be unavoidable but they are as much a perversion of his work as a poor job of dubbing would be. The playing down of dialogue in *The Seven Samurai*, could be, in part, an attempt to turn a handicap into an advantage. In earlier films where dialogue was essential, Kurosawa failed to get intelligible speech. This was a result of the inferior sound equipment and technicians assigned to him, his lack of interest in or his failure to stress enunciation, and a stock company full of people like leading man Toshiro Mifune and character actor Takashi Shimura who stress emotional force in their acting more than clarity of speech.

Given the opportunity to go all the way in *The Seven Samurai*, the Kurosawa familiars let go without restraint. The extra-largeness of their performances is entirely appropriate because they must match the virtuosity of Kurosawa's *mise-en-scène* and his epic intent. Still, this blustering style is not as unrelated to the reality it is supposed to reflect as some foreign critics may think. Bushido demands bravado.

The performances of the American seven are as magnificent in their own way as the Japanese. James Coburn as a perfection-minded knife thrower, Charles Bronson as a fatherly Neanderthal, Steve McQueen as an easy going second-in-command, and Robert Vaughn as a gun-fighting neurotic all play in that cool impressionistic style so apparently effortless that it is often mistaken for naturalism. Yul Brynner and Horst Buchholz, with their touches of a thicker Central European romanticism, have done better in other films although they are not out of place here. The cast, more than anything else, places *The Magnificent Seven* above the average Western. They were more than a match for their director.

Sturges opens strongly but quickly loses his strength when he is forced into lengthy dialogue situations. Even when the bandits attack, he cannot revive his early verve despite a few isolated bits of cleverly staged gun play. However, at the beginning of the picture, as the bandits first move in to make their demands on the peasant village, and as Brynner and McQueen ride an armed hearse through town, shot after shot of a continually tracking camera gives a tenseness through movement which few Cinemascope films achieve.

In his dialogue scenes, Sturges avoids that hallmark of the talkative picture: cutting back and forth between over-the-shoulder reverse two-shots. Instead, as in his *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, he fills the Cinemascope width with people scattered across the frame in successive distances from the camera. This often requires the actors to play more to the front than to each other. When not brought off just right—and it happens in this film—the composition resembles

the work of a department-store decorator with a deep shop window. When it works, this distribution of people deep into the setting makes one conscious of men in their environment. Sturges' awareness of place is limited; his locations are only settings for interpersonal conflict. To Kurosawa, environment itself is part of the essential conflict. The turbulence of battle grows when rain falls in *The Seven Samurai*. The defenders battle the weather as much as they fight their attackers.

Like Sturges, Kurosawa uses wide-angle long-shots of accented depth and small human figures. While the American plays entire scenes in this kind of set-up, Kurosawa uses it only to establish the topography of a sequence. To catch important action, he shifts to extremely long-focal-length lenses that kill perspective as they push the characters flat against their surroundings. Man and place become one.

Although some of his now famous slow-motion scenes have been cut in the foreign version, the most effective slow motion of *The Seven Samurai* remains: the duel between a master swordsman and his challenger early in the picture. The slow motion forces an appreciation of the skill required for this kind of fighting and the grace which it accents makes this two-man duel an advance summing up of all the larger-scale choreographic fighting that will follow when the samurai face the bandits.

The Seven Samurai is everywhere an anthology of previous and subsequent Kurosawa experiments. His infinite number of stark angles, his slow-motion scenes of combat, his repetition of action, his compression and expansion of visual perspective, and his shock cutting provide a violent style equal to the violence of his subject.

If he parades his techniques in this film, he also puts himself on display. In Kambei, the samurai leader, Kurosawa by his own admission has created his most autobiographical character. Kambei's singleness of purpose, his control of every action, his attention to others' suggestions with final reliance on his own judgment, and his concern for his men, project an

impression of Kurosawa at work.

Kurosawa dominates his production. He determined its pictorial quality to a greater degree than his cameraman, Asakazu Nakai. He provided the original idea and was the major talent in the preparation of the script (he worked with his usual collaborators, Hideo Oguni and Shinobu Hashimoto), and he exercised total control over the editing. The essential difference between *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Seven Samurai* finally comes to this: Kurosawa is an *auteur*. His conception alone, his personality dominates the film while Sturges is only the most important talent on a work which has been shaped by many men, and compromised by many Hollywood conventions.

The only limitations on *The Seven Samurai* are those of the director's individual talent. Yet Kurosawa's self-acknowledged debt to the American Western, particularly John Ford's, helped to determine the shape of *The Seven Samurai*. This foreign influence has nourished him. Without the American cinema, there would be no Kurosawa.

Oddly, in Japan at the moment, there is a craze for fast-draw skills, side-arms collecting, and cowboy and gunman stories. As both a cause and an effect of this, dubbed versions of every major U.S. Western videofilm series now play on Japanese television while crowds fight to get into theaters running the latest Westerns from America. Unwilling to let such spoils go entirely to foreigners and television, theatrical film studios have countered with a new genre: the Japanese Western. These films transfer Western stories, characters, and paraphernalia unchanged to Japanese settings without regard for any reality ever experienced by a Japanese. A look at the impressive Japanese returns on Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* was enough to excite one Tokyo studio into planning a remake of it as one of the new Japanese Westerns. Meanwhile, back in Hollywood, the cycle begins again: a minor United Artists producer has announced a Western based on Kurosawa's latest period piece, *Yojimbo*.