

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1974

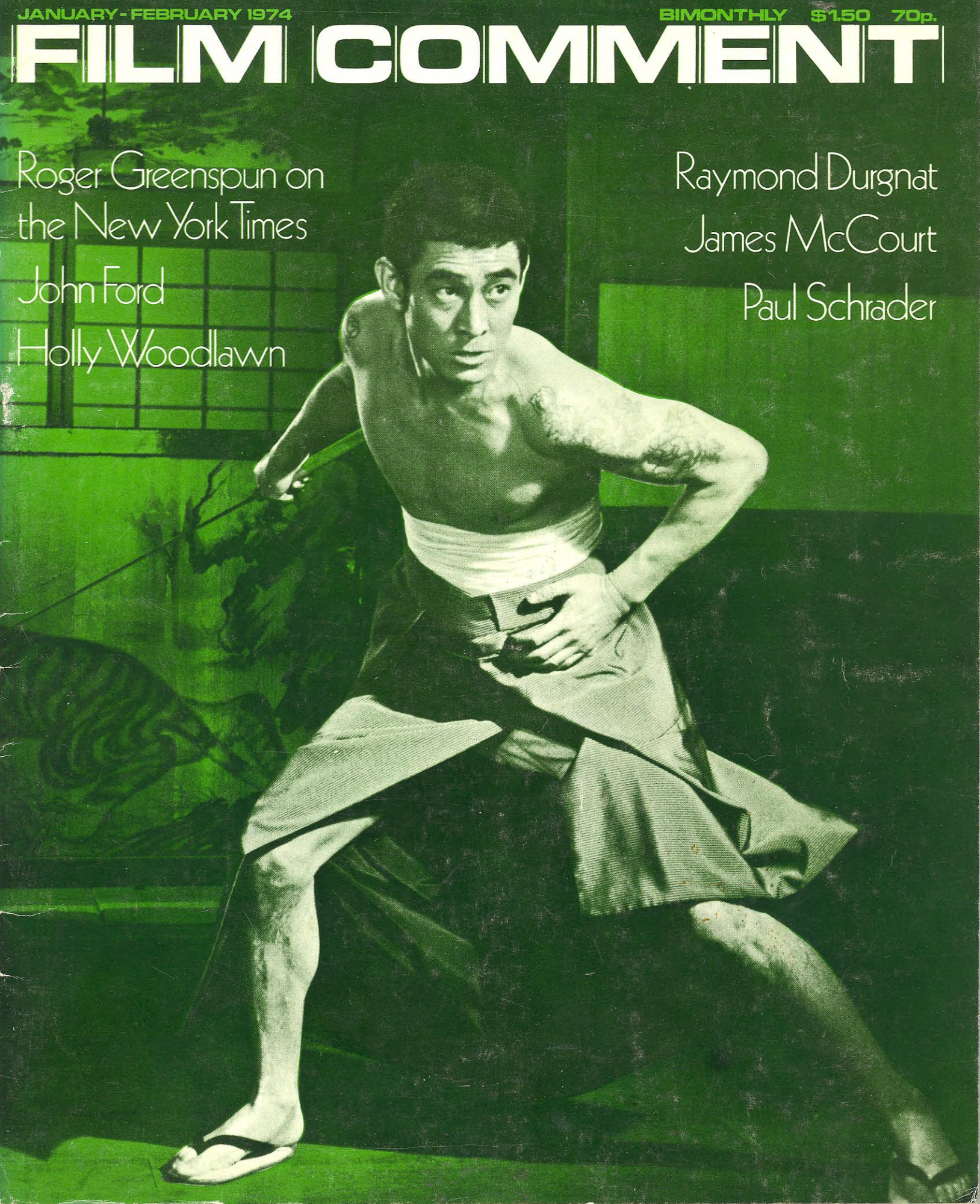
BIMONTHLY \$1.50 70p.

FILM COMMENT

Roger Greenspun on
the New York Times

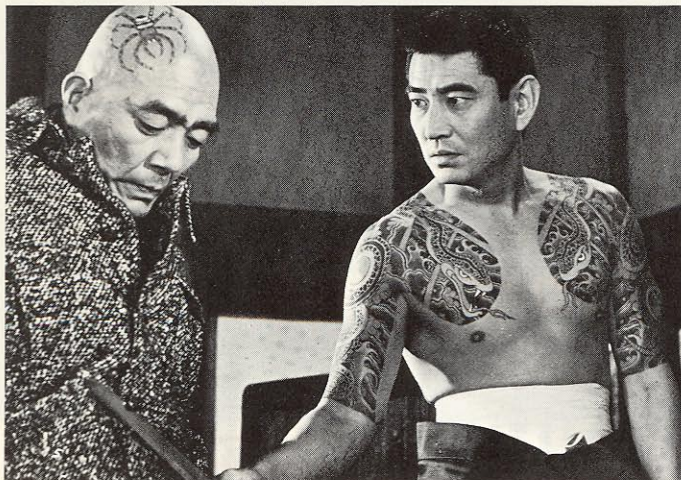
John Ford
Holly Woodlawn

Raymond Durgnat
James McCourt
Paul Schrader



"Throw my dead body into the river. A Yakuza needs no grave."

—Koji Tsuruta in *Hibotan Bakuto: Isshuku Ippan*



The colorful tattoo. Ken Takakura in *Toseinin Retsuden*.



Junko Fuji as the "liberated" yakuza in *Hibotan Bakuto: Isshuku Ippan*.



All photos: Paul Schrader

A finger cutting. Koji Tsuruta in *Kizudarake no Jinsei*.

YAKUZA-EIGA

A Primer

by Paul Schrader

"We're outlaws but we're humane"

SET PIECE #10: The Finger-cutting

This script extract from *THE YAKUZA*, written and produced by Paul Schrader, involves the film's two main characters—Harry Kilmer (Robert Mitchum), a Southern California private detective transported to Tokyo to prevent a murder, and Tanaka Ken (Ken Takakura), an honorable businessman drawn back into the *yakuza* underworld to help his old American friend-adversary—and one of the striking set pieces of *yakuza-eiga*: the finger-cutting.

Interior Ken's House—Night

Tanaka Ken comes to the door. He is surprised to see Harry. He is wearing blue jeans and an informal shirt. His left little finger is professionally bandaged [to hide the results of an earlier demonstration of Set Piece #10].

KEN. Harry, what's the matter?

KILMER. Chotto hanashitain de gozansu.

(SUBTITLE: *I wish to speak with you a moment.*)

KEN. Of course.

Ken gestures for Kilmer to come into the "Foreigner Greeting Room." Harry shakes his head.

KILMER. Iie, seishiki no. (SUBTITLE: *No. Formally.*)

Ken understands.

KEN. Just a moment. I'll put on my kimono.

Ken walks into another room. Kilmer removes his shoes and walks toward the tatami room.

CUT TO:

Interior Tanaka Ken's Tatami Room—Night

Kilmer walks into the tatami room and sits down. On the table is a small glass and a pint of Johnny Walker Black—Ken has been drinking alone. While Ken is out of the room, Harry pulls a small white silk square out of his kimono and places it on the black lacquered table. He rests his outstretched little finger on the silk square. Harry unsheathes his short katana, places its tip next to his finger, and prepares to cut down.

Kilmer winces and bites his lips. In the tradition of *yakuza-eiga*, we do not see the actual amputation. But it appears from Kilmer's face that he has only partially cut through his finger. Bolstering his courage, Kilmer tightens his face and finishes the job. His face is blitzed with pain. He almost faints but manages to retain his balance. Kilmer pulls a white cotton handkerchief from his kimono and wraps his bleeding hand. He covers the severed finger with the four corners of the silk square. Ken, dressed in formal blue kimono, enters the room and is shocked to see what Harry has done. He knocks the small whiskey glass and the bottle from the table in a dramatic sweeping gesture, and sits across from Harry in a formal position. Staring at his knees, Harry speaks softly:

KILMER: Tanaka Ken-san, ashiwa mai mo iwa mo hidoi koto o shimashita.

(SUBTITLE: *Tanaka Ken, I have brought great pain into your life, both in the past and present.*)

KEN. I understand. Say no more.

Kilmer fights back both emotional and physical pain to speak:

KILMER (hesitant). I must say more. (A beat.) Zutto nangai jikan anata wa... Moshi anata wa yoroshi... ano... (SUBTITLE: *For many years you have silently... If you want to... ah...*)

KEN. Just say it, Harry.

KILMER. I don't know all the rules of this

ceremony, Ken. It is permissible for me to ask you a favor?

KEN. You and I, Harry, we can make our own rules. Ask.

Kilmer swallows hard. His throat is bulging with emotion.

KILMER. It would make my heart very happy if you would again live with your wife Eko. (A beat.) And you would again have a child as good as Taro. (He bows.)

KEN (nods). I understand.

Kilmer pushes the silk-wrapped finger across the table to Ken.

KILMER. Please accept this as a token of my apology.

KEN. I accept.

Ken touches the bloody cloth to his forehead and slips it inside his kimono.

KILMER (nods). Thank you.

KEN (bowing). Harry-Kilmer-san ni motto ni aniki de gozansen. (SUBTITLE: *No man has a greater friend than Harry Kilmer.*)

KILMER (bowing). Tanaka Ken-san ni motto ni aniki de gozansen.

(SUBTITLE: *No man has a greater friend than Tanaka Ken.*)

Ken reaches behind him and pulls out a bottle of sake and two cups. There is a blood smudge on his forehead.

KEN. Would you like some sake, Harry?

Kilmer looks up for the first time since their ordeal began. Their eyes meet.

Harry smiles, nods, and passes out, crashing to the floor.

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YAKUZA-EIGA

The Japanese gangster film (the *yakuza-eiga*) is, as a *yakuza* would say, a lone wolf in the clan of gangster films.* The *yakuza-eiga* bears little resemblance to its American or European counterparts. The rules formulated by Robert Warshaw for the seminal American gangster films do not apply to the Japanese gangster film; neither do the more recent definitions of the American and French *film noir*. The *yakuza* film does not reflect the dilemma of social mobility seen in the Thirties gangster films, nor does it reflect the despair of the postwar *film noir*.

The Japanese gangster film aims for a higher purpose than its Western counterparts: it seeks to codify a positive, workable morality. In American terms, it is more like a Western than a gangster film. Like the Western, the *yakuza-eiga* chooses timelessness over relevance, myth over realism; it seeks not social commentary, but moral truth. Although the average *yakuza* film is technically inferior to an American or European gangster film, it has achieved a nobility denied its counterparts—a nobility normally reserved for the Western.

● *History.* "Yakuza" literally means "gambler" or "good-for-nothing" but has come to mean "gangster" or "mobster" and refers to the 125,000 or so very real gangsters in the Japanese underworld today. The *yakuza-eiga* is a youngster in the community of film genres. The first *yakuza* films appeared less than a decade ago, and it is only in the last few years that the *yakuza-eiga* has assumed the preëminent position in the Japanese film industry. Approximately one hundred gangster films are now made each year in Japan, and, along with sex comedies, constitute the backbone of Japan's declining film industry.

The *yakuza-eiga* did not originate, as did the American gangster film, out of a desire to capture Today's Headlines, but instead evolved from an older genre, the samurai film—an evolution by chance rather than design. Before 1964 all Japanese sword films were *jidai-geki*, period films. The government had banished the

samurai and banned the long sword in 1868, and there were no films set in the post-1868 period in which the protagonists used long swords. By legal definition, the swordsman was an outlaw; no filmmaker wished to assign the simon-pure samurai code of *giri-ninjo* ("duty-humanity") to an outlaw; and without *giri-ninjo*, there could be no protagonist. Samurai films of the Fifties often featured pale-faced, wholesome young samurai who defeated whole clans of *yakuza*, but there was always a clear distinction made between the code of the samurai and the code of the *yakuza*. There could also be realistic portrayals of *yakuza*—Toshiro Mifune played a small-time gangster in Kurosawa's *DRUNKEN ANGEL* (1948)—but, deprived of the samurai code, these portrayals had neither epic nor heroic dimensions.

In the early Sixties the rigid demarcation between the ancient samurai and the modern *yakuza* began to dissolve. The samurai films were declining in popularity and the studios sought ways to update them for the new audiences. As with every important development in *yakuza-eiga*, Toei Studios took the lead. The transition from *jidai-geki* to *yakuza-eiga* can first be seen in the *JIROCHO* series produced by Toei from 1962 to 1964.

This series, which starred Koji Tsuruta as Jirocho and was directed by Masahiro Makino, has been called a "*chonmage yakuza-eiga*." (The *chonmage* is the top-knot hair style of the samurai.) Toei considers the *JIROCHO* series *jidai-geki*, but the *JIROCHO* films are period films primarily in their costumes; in character and conflict they foreshadow the first phase of *yakuza-eiga*.

The first authentic *yakuza* film was *BAKUTO* (GAMBLER), directed in July 1964 by Shingehiro Ozawa and starring Koji Tsuruta. Ozawa had been directing period films for Toei since 1954, but after the success of *BAKUTO* he devoted himself exclusively to writing and directing *yakuza* films. Toei itself made only three pure *yakuza* films in 1964, but they were so well received that by 1965 Toei was in almost full-scale *yakuza-eiga* production.

The initial phase of *yakuza-eiga* lasted from approximately 1964 to 1967. This was a period of low budgets and fast shooting schedules. Toei explored the new market, developed new stars, and evolved the paraphernalia and ritual of the new genre. It soon became clear that audiences preferred *yakuza-eiga* to period films, and one by one the older established directors were transferred to the new genre: Ozawa and Makino in 1964, Tai Kato and Tomu Uchida in 1965. Koji Tsuruta was the major star of this first *yakuza* period, but he was soon joined by the other two stars of Toei's *yakuza* triumvirate: Ken Takakura and Junko Fuji.

The new genre was legitimized primarily by two films. *ABASHIRI BANGAICHI* (ABASHIRI PRISON), directed in April 1965 by Teruo Ishii and starring Ken Takakura, was the first great *yakuza* commercial hit. The Abashiri Prison story was so successful that Takakura has remade it eighteen times to date. (When a Japanese film is successful, the studio doesn't rerelease it, it remakes it.) Although it was of marginal artistic value, *ABASHIRI BANGAICHI* clearly demonstrated that *yakuza* films had a far greater potential audience than anyone had imagined.

YUKYO IPPIKI: *SEIKI NO YATAPE*, directed in January 1966 by Tai Kato and starring Kinnosuke Nakamura, was the first *yakuza* artistic success. Later that year Kosaku Yamashita directed the stunning *KYODAI JINJI* (FAMILY OBLIGATIONS) (also the first of a series), and the new genre not only had its stars but its two best directors.

In its second period, from 1968 to 1971, the *yakuza-eiga* enjoyed the blessings of large(r) budgets and mass audiences. It was now an authentic genre. Toei made twenty-six *yakuza* films in 1969 and considers it their peak year for profits. *Yakuza* films now used exterior locations (sparingly) and had a classier look. Yamashita's *BAKUCHIUCHI: SOCHO TOBAKU* (GAMBLING HOUSE: PRESIDENTIAL GAMBLING), considered the "masterpiece" of the genre, was released in 1968. Also in 1968 Tomu Uchida, one of Japan's oldest and most respected directors, filmed one of the best *yakuza* films, *JINSEI GEKIJOU: HISHAKAKU TO KIRATSUNE* (THEATER OF LIFE: HISHAKAKU AND KIRATSUNE).

It was during this period that the other studios realized they could no longer afford to ignore Toei's lucrative "B" genre and got into the act themselves. Toho, Shochiku, Nikkatsu, and the now defunct Daei Studios all sunk money into *yakuza* productions. Shochiku's three-hour version of *JINSEI GEKIJOU* (THEATER OF LIFE), directed by Kato in 1971, is certainly the most expensive and ambitious *yakuza* film thus far produced. It is also one of the best.

At the moment the *yakuza-eiga* is again in a period of transition, moving uncertainly toward its third phase. Production remains high (Toei made thirty gangster films in 1972), but audience tastes are fluctuating. The enormous success of *THE GODFATHER* in Japan caused the Toei brass, again leading the way, to finance more "documentary-style" *yakuza* films. In these documentary-style films the setting of *yakuza* conflicts was updated from the "classical" period (1915–1935) to contemporary times. Whereas the classical-style *yakuza* films were open morality tales, the newer documentary-style films featured a far

*This article is of necessity a "primer" on *yakuza-eiga*. My research was limited by both film resources and factual information. Toei Studios maintains a theater in Los Angeles (the Linda Lea, the only Toei theater in the Continental U.S.), and I was able to see approximately fifty *yakuza-eiga* there. (Like Japanese theaters, the Linda Lea changes its bill three times a week. All requests for Toei films should be addressed to Toei Distributors at the Linda Lea, 251 South Main Street, Los Angeles.) In addition my brother Leonard and several friends in Japan, Joyce Kruithof and Heigo Hosoya, were able to furnish factual information and interview Toei executives. In the U.S. Nobuyo Tsuchida and Haruji Nakamura assisted me by translating various materials.

more dubious morality. This transition has caused an uproar at Toei, and Koji Tsuruta, the genre's oldest and most respected star, has publicly stated that the new documentary-style films "have no *kokoro*" (heart). (In *BAKUTO KIRIKOMITAI* [GAMBLER'S COUNTERATTACK, 1971], for example, Tsuruta was forced to shoot a corrupt policeman in the back, an unforgivable breach of code for a samuraiesque *yakuza*—not only in the back, but with a gun rather than a sword!) Toei is currently making both the classical and documentary-style *yakuza* films, and it is uncertain which will dominate the third phase of *yakuza-eiga*.

Part of *yakuza-eiga*'s current dilemma stems from the fact that it is making the transition from a "B" to an "A" genre. *Yakuza* films have always been made with low budgets and short shooting schedules. (Even today a "big" budget *yakuza* film costs \$300,000 and has a three-week shooting schedule.) For the most part the genre has been critically ignored in Japan—although such esteemed writers as Yukio Mishima, Ryuho Saito, and Tadao Sato have come to its defense—and is virtually unknown in the West. The prestigious Japanese directors, though often unemployed, have refused to work within the *yakuza* conventions (although Shinoda's first film, *PALE FLOWER*, was a *yakuza* variant). But now *yakuza-eiga* has come into respectability. Its stars are the greatest in Japan; its films the most popular. Ken Takakura will soon star with Robert Mitchum in a large budget *yakuza* film to be directed by Sydney Pollack and financed by Warner Brothers. The Japanese gangster film is no longer a "B" genre. As greater demands are made of it, the traditional *yakuza-eiga* film will respond by either rising to maturity or slipping into self-parody.

● *Themes*. The *yakuza-eiga* has two primary themes: duty (*giri*) and humanity (*ninjo*). That the genre has two themes, *giri* and *ninjo*, rather than one, *giri-ninjo*, is more than a semantic distinction. It helps explain not only how the *yakuza-eiga* came into existence but also why it continues to thrive.

The samurai film, of course, had only one theme, *giri-ninjo*; the Siamese-twin themes of duty and humanity were so interlocked as to be indistinguishable from each other. For the samurai, duty was humanity, and vice versa. But this single theme proved to be financially limiting in a contemporary setting. The high-flown code of *giri-ninjo* could not be applied to a modern gangster, who, by the very fact that he carried a long sword, was an outlaw and therefore violated the duty expected of him as a member of the state. Ergo: there could be no *yakuza* heroes.



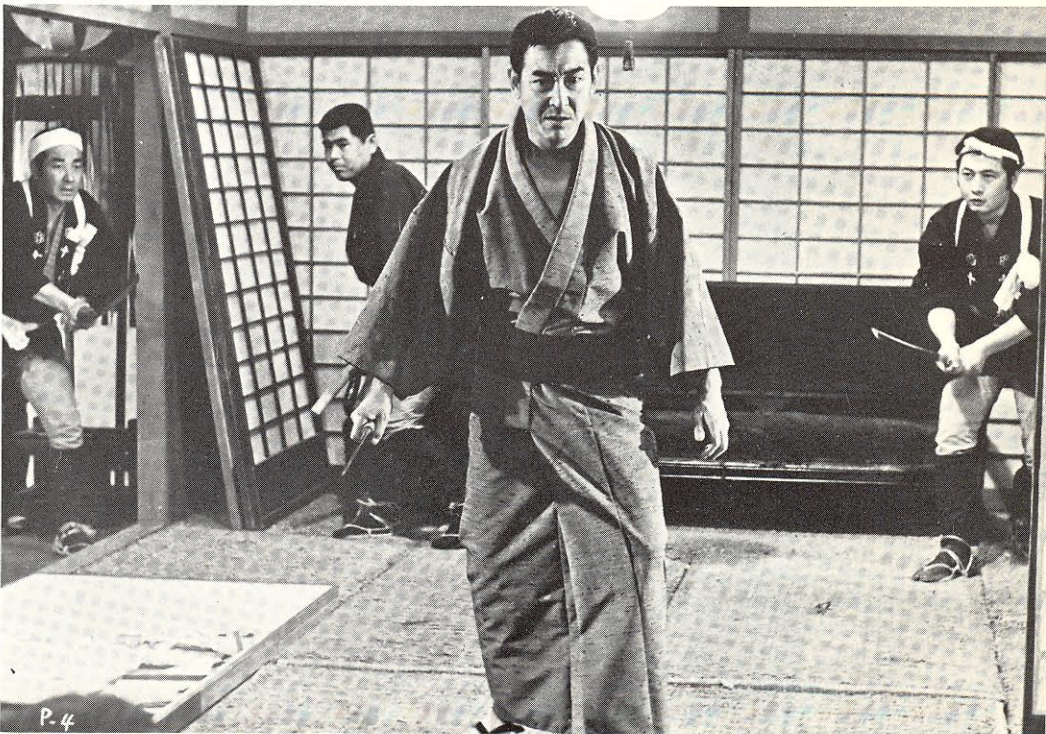
Ken Takakura and Ryo Ikebe in the duel scene from *Showa Zankyoden: Karajishi Jingi*.



Ken Takakura's standard pose. *Kanto Hizakura Ikka*.



Low comedy in *Hibotan Bakuto: Isshuku Ippan*.



Yakuza star, Koji Tsuruta in the final fight of *Toseinin Retsuden*.

This inhibiting syndrome was unraveled by some unsung Toei executive who divided that single word in two, transforming a single concept into an oxymoron. *Giri-ninjo* became *giri* and *ninjo*; duty-humanity became duty or humanity, thus side-stepping the samurai/*yakuza* dichotomy. It was now possible for a gangster to have duty without humanity, humanity without duty, or any combination thereof. Under certain circumstances, the *yakuza* could be both honorable and criminal.

"The *yakuza* world—where duty is more important and humanity hangs in the balance," proclaims a *yakuza* movie poster—a statement which would have never applied to a samurai film. The oxymoronic *yakuza* theme of *giri-ninjo* is the subject of Tadao Sato's lengthy essay, "Reflex of Loyalty,"* perhaps the best article written to date on *yakuza-eiga*. Sato explains, then laments the bifurcation of the traditional concept of *giri-ninjo*; he sees the *yakuza-eiga* as having created a new situational morality where duty can be "more important" than humanity—thus opening many new doors to old forms of fascism. This explains the infatuation of both the new left (the *Zenkyoto*, student radicals) and the new right (Mishima's Self-Defense Force) with *yakuza-eiga*. Student radicals have been known to spend hours watching *yakuza* films in preparation for a clash with the police; similarly, ultra-right novelist Yukio Mishima interviewed Koji Tsuruta and wrote lengthy articles in praise of *yakuza-eiga*. Both left and right can draw great spiritual sustenance from a genre which allows one individual to forego his duty if humanity must be served, and another to forego humanity for the sake of duty. In Yamashita's *KYODAI JINJI* the following words are sung as Tsuruta goes into battle: "I may be but a fool, But maybe a fool is needed to awaken the people." What grander sentiments could any radical ask for?

The *yakuza* morality of *giri-ninjo* may seem potentially fascistic to Sato, but to Americans, accustomed to the open fascism of films like *THE GODFATHER* and *DIRTY HARRY*, *yakuza* movies seem clearly humanitarian. The conflict between duty and humanity is always a complex one; and humanity, even when it is rejected, is given a far richer examination than in American gangster films, where it seems to have been dismissed even before the projector starts up.

The *yakuza* protagonist is stripped of the moral security of the samurai. The total war he wages against his enemies is less important than the moral conflict he must fight on the battleground of his own conscience. Invariably, the *yakuza-eiga* protagonist is a man (or woman) of

high moral principles trapped in a web of circumstances which compromise them. He attempts to pursue both duty and humanity but finds them drawing increasingly apart. In the end he must choose between duty and humanity, a decision that can only be made in a bath of blood.

A typical Toei *yakuza* film—there's no use mentioning specific titles since most of Toei's three hundred or so *yakuza* films have the same plot structure—opens with the release of the hero from prison. He has gone to prison to spare his clan a police investigation, but, upon his return, finds the clan has fallen under the control of an evil *Oyabun* (godfather). True to his duty, he nonetheless rejoins the clan and attempts to exert a moral influence from within. He soon finds he has little influence and is himself being requested to commit deeds totally alien to his personal morality. Still he doesn't flinch from his duty. Even in service to an openly vile *Oyabun*, the *yakuza* hero will suffer intense physical pain, reject the love of a woman, see helpless persons oppressed, and, in some cases, kill a decent and good man.

But as the *yakuza* pursues his duty, his world becomes more openly schizoid. On one side, duty and its incumbent virtues are assembled; on the other stand humanity and its virtues. With the forces of duty stand such virtues as obedience to the *Oyabun*, obligation to the clan (or *kyodai jinji*, literally, "family obligations"), humility, stoicism, and willingness to die for duty. On the other bank stand humanity and its virtues: social consciousness, sympathy for the oppressed, love for wife, sweetheart, friends and relatives, humility, stoicism, and willingness to die for humanity. Whether he chooses duty or humanity, the *yakuza* hero's attitude will be the same. He will be humble, stoical, prepared to die.

For the first seventy-five or so minutes, the *yakuza* film carefully builds this web of duties and humanitarian obligations. These forces are in continual conflict; they permeate every conversation and action. Lines like "We *yakuza* obey our code no matter what happens" are counterbalanced by statements that "evil has no code." In *CHIZOME NO KARAJISHI* (BLOOD-STAINED COURAGE, Toei, 1967) an *Oyabun* states, "We're outlaws but we're humane," then ten minutes later says, "A friend is a friend, and a job is a job."

Trapped in this schizoid world, the moral *yakuza* has little to look forward to. "There are only two roads for a *yakuza*," a minor character says in *HISHAKAKU TO KIRATSUNE*, "prison and death." Before he goes on his march to the final fight in the *ABASHIRI BANGAICHI* series, Ken Takakura sings: "I'm off to kill the enemy, My sword in my hand, And when it's over, It's back to Abashiri Prison again."

The moral dilemma is invariably resolved by blood. At some point the evil *Oyabun* does a deed so reprehensible that duty can no longer be served and humanity demands his death. All moral struggle falls from the hero's shoulders as he takes his long sword in hand and marches toward the evil *Oyabun*'s house where he will kill or be killed. He is suddenly free to punish evil and kill his *Oyabun*. The ancient samurai would kill himself before killing his evil master; the contemporary *yakuza*, however, because *ninjo* has been split off from *giri*, is free to forsake duty and kill his master. In the prolonged ten-minute slaughter which follows, the evil *Oyabun* always dies, whereas the *yakuza* hero does in some cases, and survives to start anew in others. The contrast with the samurai film is complete: the samurai forsakes duty and dies, the *yakuza* forsakes duty and lives. Thus is the postwar ethic overlaid on the grid the samurai film.

These themes are presented in their richest form in *SOCHO TOBAKU*, a film which Mishima called a masterpiece and which Sato has written about at length. Made by Toei in 1968, *SOCHO TOBAKU* (PRESIDENTIAL GAMBLING) was directed by Kosaku Yamashita and written by Kazuo Kasahara. Technically, it is not much better than most *yakuza-eiga*; thematically, it is the most complex and introspective of all the *yakuza* films.

Nakai (Koji Tsuruta) and Matsuda (Tomisaburo Wakayama) are blood brothers and high-ranking *yakuza* in the Tenryu Syndicate. The aging beneficent *Oyabun* dies and Nakai, out of humility, refuses the successorship. Semba, an outside business-oriented *Oyabun*, prevails upon the clan leadership to pass over Matsuda and give the *Oyabun*ship to an unwitting puppet. Nakai, the personification of duty, accepts this injustice and attempts to serve the new leadership in the best manner possible. In contrast, Matsuda, the unbounded force of humanity, vows to fight the new leadership at every turn. First Matsuda is reprimanded, then demoted, and finally ostracized. Nakai defends Matsuda publicly on every occasion but privately attempts to get Matsuda to submit to the new *Oyabun*. In a long, shattering scene set in a cemetery, Nakai, in the midst of a downpour, breaks his blood-bond cup with Matsuda. "Nothing," Nakai tells him, "is more important than loyalty."

Matsuda prepares to attack the clan from without while Nakai vainly tries to reform it from within. Matsuda kills the puppet *Oyabun* and Semba's forces take over the syndicate. Nakai is then accused by Semba of protecting the murderer, his former blood brother, Matsuda. True to his *Oyabun*, Nakai searches out Matsuda and kills him wordlessly. He then returns and prepares to kill Semba. "Where is

*Privately translated for the author.

your loyalty?" Semba cries. "Loyalty?" Nakai answers, "What do I know about loyalty? I'm just a common criminal." He vengefully kills Semba and is captured by the police and led away to prison where, the narrator tells us, he will spend his life as a murderer "beyond rehabilitation."

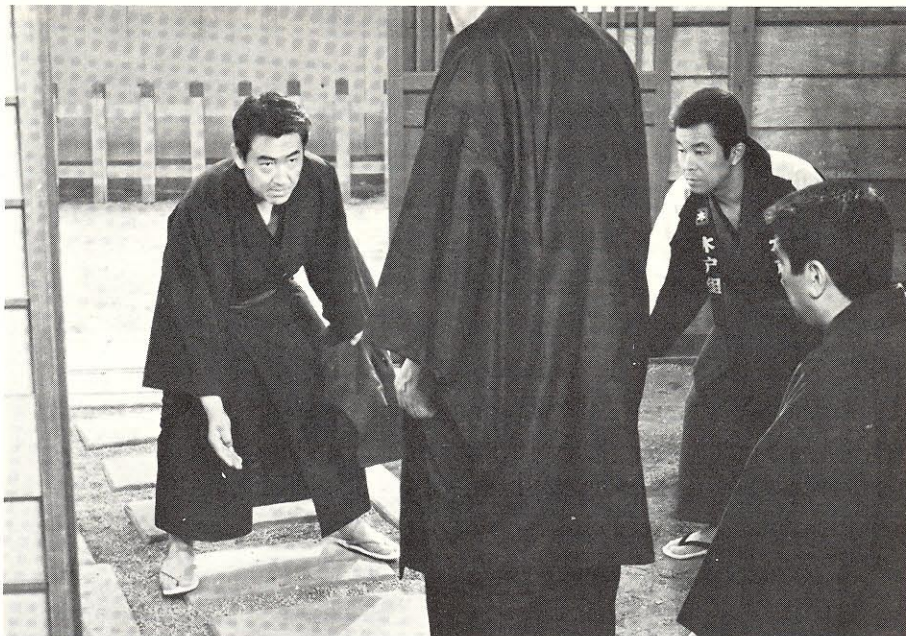
SOCHO TOBAKU is the richest and most complex *yakuza-eiga* made to date; it is also the darkest and most pessimistic. Both duty and humanity end in death; no middle road is offered. It is the only *yakuza* film I've seen that does not even give the audience the standard cathartic closing fight scene.

Films like SOCHO TOBAKU do not seem, at least to my Western mind, to open up the new possibilities of fascism Sato suggests. Films like THE GODFATHER openly promote the fascist gangster-family community; *yakuza-eiga* struggle against it. SOCHO TOBAKU rams home several fundamental themes—themes which lead to individual despair rather than groupthink militance: (1) the traditional Japanese values of duty and humanity have become unjoined and polarized by contemporary society (i.e., "the center does not hold"); (2) an unrestrained amount of either duty or humanity leads to death; (3) a noble man can survive if he continually maintains the proper balance of duty and humanity, but his life will be full of loneliness, suffering, and despair.

● *Genre conventions.* *Yakuza-eiga* is probably the most restricted genre yet devised. Only a limited number of things can happen in a *yakuza* film. The characters, conflicts, resolutions, and themes are preset by genre convention. To be sure, the whole notion of genre is one of predictability; but *yakuza* films may carry it even farther than necessary. It is not unusual to find four or five films virtually indistinguishable in stars, script, and direction.

Japanese gangster films draw upon a catalog of genre paraphernalia far more extensive than anything in their Western counterparts. *Yakuza* films are litanies of private argot, subtle body language, obscure codes, elaborate rites, iconographic costumes and tattoos. An entire film may consist of nothing more than a series of set pieces. An uninitiated viewer may see huge chunks of film pass before his eyes without ever having the slightest idea of their significance.

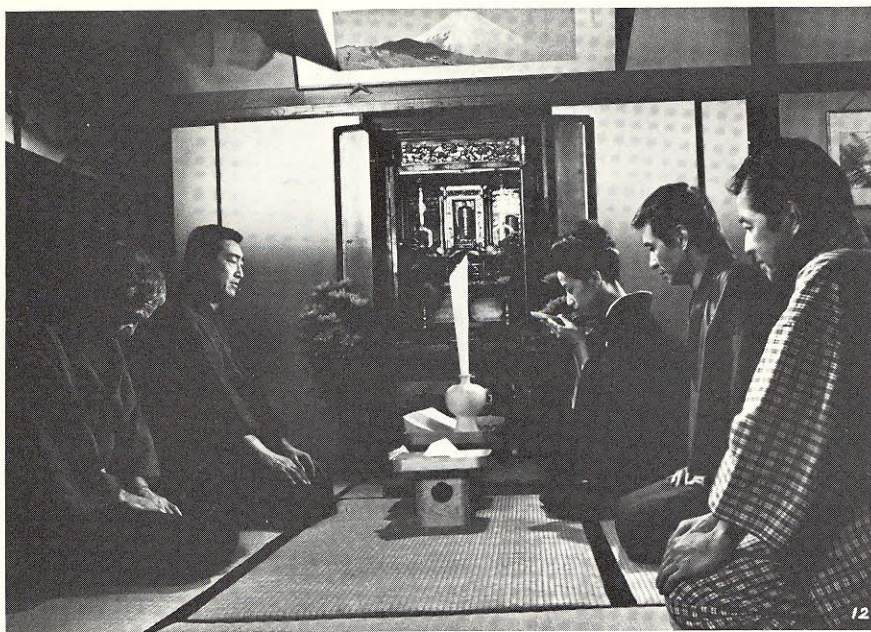
Because *yakuza-eiga* is such a young genre, it is still possible to describe its circumference—to speak of a "typical" *yakuza* plot or character. The controversial documentary-style *yakuza-eiga* of recent years are the first open dissenters from what had been a remarkably orthodox genre. The American gangster film, on the other hand, has undergone dozens of schisms and separatist movements.



The introduction scene. The *yakuza* greeting. *Bakuchiuchi: Nagurikomi.*



Junko Fuji reveals her tattoo in *Hibotan Bakuto: Isshuku Ippan*. This is the only film in which the *yakuza*-woman shows any part of her body.



The blood brother ceremony in *Kinagashi Hyakunin*.



A gambling scene. *Onna Toseinin: Otano Moshimasu*.



The final march. *Toseinin Retsuden*.



The cemetery scene from *Socho Tobaku* with Junko Fuji, Tomisabura Wakayama and Koji Tsuruta.

The average *yakuza-eiga* screenwriter's job is more one of organization than free imagination. Given the basic story line the screenwriter is free to determine several things: the setting and time, the type of industry over which the clans are contesting, the shadings of the relationships, and the sequence of the various genre set-pieces.

There are twenty or so basic *yakuza* set-pieces. All of these scenes do not occur in every *yakuza* film, but every *yakuza* film will have six to ten of them. Working from a hypothetical master list, a screenwriter can select a sequence of these scenes and assemble them like beads on a rosary. When he has strung enough beads to fill an hour and a half of screen time, the rosary is finished. A hypothetical master list of *yakuza-eiga* set pieces would be certain to contain these scenes:

1. The protagonist comes out of prison.
2. The evil *Oyabun* plots the takeover of the clan.
3. The evil *Oyabun*'s henchmen, all huffing and puffing, bully local merchants or workmen.
4. The gambling scene. Apart from their protection rackets, *yakuza* clans make their money from gambling rooms. In the gambling scene colorful *hanafuda* flower cards are spread across a long white table. These scenes end in a minor unresolved confrontation.
5. *Yakuza* introduction scene. A *yakuza* introduces himself to a fellow gangster in a special ceremony. Putting his right hand on his right knee, he extends his left hand, palm upturned, and states his name, place of birth, and clan affiliation. These ritual introductions can go on for several minutes.
6. The revealing of the tattoo. Most *yakuza* wear a full upper-body tattoo. The dramatic revealing of this tattoo reveals the bearer's profession and is an invitation to fight. The workmanship and motif of the tattoo (dragons, peonies, etc.) serve to define even further the personality of the wearer.
7. The blood brother ritual. Small porcelain cups are exchanged in an elaborate ritual. If, at a later point, this cup is broken willfully, the formal blood-brothers are now mortal enemies.
8. Low comedy scenes with workers and townspeople.
9. The disclosure scene. The Hero, Geisha, or Best Friend reveals a tortured episode from the past which serves to further tighten the web of duties and obligations.
10. The finger cutting. To atone for a great offense or injustice a *yakuza* is sometimes required to cut off his left little finger and present it to the one he has offended. The protagonist will sometimes

do this to atone for the mistake of his evil *Oyabun* or an errant follower.

11. The evil *Oyabun* dupes the honorable *Oyabun* into accepting a dubious liaison. The protagonist respectfully registers his protest.

12. Deathbed scene. The good *Oyabun* or some other honorable person slain by the heavies offers a variety of deathbed platitudes to his weeping family and friends.

13. Duel scene. Two honorable *yakuza* protagonists are forced to fight each other out of duty to their *Oyabuns*.

14. The redeeming of the geisha. Sometimes the protagonist will purchase the geisha he loves outright (borrowing money from enemies if necessary), sometimes he will offer his life as a stake in a gambling contest for her life. In either case, their love will never be consummated.

15. Cemetery scene. The hero visits the grave of his dead *Oyabun* (wife, father) before seeking his revenge.

16. The entreaty. The geisha or lover entreats the protagonist not to seek his revenge but he does not heed her pleas.

17. The final march. The protagonist and his one or two closest friends walk down darkened empty streets toward the enemy compound. The movie's theme song, usually sung by the protagonist, plays as they walk.

18. The final battle. A tour de force fight scene where all the accumulated obligations are expiated in a grand finale of bloodletting.

It is not difficult to be a standard *yakuza-eiga* screenwriter. If one has read two good books and doesn't fear ghosts (in H.L. Mencken's phrase) and knows the genre elements, he can assemble a shootable *yakuza* script. The only requirement is that he be able to work fast.

I have described the restrictions imposed upon a *yakuza* storyline in the most unflattering way possible because one should have no illusions about the "creative freedom" possible within a genre format. *Yakuza-eiga* are production line films. Scripts are conceived by committee and assigned to directors by rotation. Stars like Tsuruta and Takakura appear in from ten to fifteen films a year. Every two weeks a *yakuza* film pops off the Toei assembly line, ready or not.

Genres are not free flights of the imagination. The art of a genre occurs within the strictures. Only when one understands that icons are *supposed* to be two-dimensional does the study of their shape and form become interesting. Similarly, it is only after one understands—and appreciates—the genre conventions of *yakuza-eiga* that the study of its themes and styles becomes enlightening. The beauty and the power of Kasahara's

SOCHO TOBAKU script stems from the fact that it works within the genre, not against it.

The purpose of genre conventions is first of all functional; each has an assembly-line task to perform. The function of a *yakuza* plot is to create a web of duties and humanitarian obligations. The function of *yakuza* characterization is to create characters susceptible to the demands of those obligations. The function of the set pieces is to put flash and filagree into the film so that it will not drag while the web of duties and obligations is being woven.

● *Stylistics*. I wish I could say *yakuza-eiga* has clearly established its own film style, but it hasn't. For the most part the style of *yakuza* films is a function of the budget. Long static takes, flat backdrops, and interior sets are favored not because they are ideally suited to the story or theme, but because they are ideally suited to a low budget. Directors, cinematographers, and set designers are not given the time or money to plan their scenes properly. A director, if he has any talent or artistic ambition at all, must save his resources for one or two tour-de-force scenes and let the rest of the film slip past. Most everyone else literally "walks through" a picture, completing the shooting in two weeks, the editing in one, and moving on to the next picture.

Among the more talented directors, cinematographers, and designers, one can see the stirrings of a unique *yakuza-eiga* style. The more *yakuza* budgets are increased, the clearer this style will become. *Yakuza* films contain various inchoate stylistic elements which—given time, money, and care—will develop into a major genre style. To the extent this style exists I would call it (for want of a better term) Japanese expressionism.

Japanese expressionism is keyed to drama and individual moments. It is the visual equivalent of the Revealing of the Tattoo, the Gambling Scene, or the Final Fight. Mad erratic splashes of color are favored; the film will unexpectedly cut to a solid deep blue or red backdrop. These abrupt transitions will often be accompanied by Moriconesque gongs and clangings. As Tsuruta walks off in the final shot of Uchida's HISHAKAKU TO KIRATSUNE (a perfect example of a film where a major director concentrates only on certain moments), a burst of bright red smoke suddenly appears from nowhere and fills the background.

Action directors like Yamashita and Kato have developed unique tracking patterns which, unlike Ophüls's, are not for fluidity but are full of false energy and excitement. Like the color schemes, these tracking patterns serve to hype the dramatic moments.

● *Personalities*. Stars: The studio star system is still very much intact in Japan. A star is contracted to a single studio. In return, he works continually and is carefully built up to a position of national prominence. The star's name is advertised above that of the director, even above the title of the film. It is not uncommon for a film to be advertised as so-and-so's "new series." Toei Studios is the MGM of the *yakuza* star system, controlling the three major genre stars: Ken Takakura, Koji Tsuruta, and Junko Fuji. (For the purposes of this article I have concentrated most of my attention on Toei, the pioneer of *yakuza* films and still the largest and most methodical producer of *yakuza-eiga*.)

Ken Takakura, born in 1930, has the rugged lean features of Paul Newman or Steve McQueen and is the number one star in the Orient today. (It is a measure of the neglect accorded to *yakuza-eiga* in the West that neither Takakura or any of the other personalities mentioned in this section appears in the only English-language index to Japanese film.) He has made over two hundred films since he joined Toei in 1956. Although he originally appeared in samurai films and domestic comedies, he is now solely a *yakuza* star. His most popular (and still continuing) *yakuza-eiga* series are ABASHIRI BANGAICHI (ABASHIRI PRISON), NIHON KYOKAKUDEN (JAPANESE CHIVALRY) and SHOWA ZANKYODEN. "Star" is the best word to describe Takakura; he has a magical sense of presence, an ability to control the frame around him by poise, gesture, and expression. Unlike most Japanese actors, Takakura is a master of understatement. He is most effective when he is silent, bowing, nodding, reacting; he speaks reticently and with great authority. Three books have been published about him in Japan, and he has achieved cult status. He represents everything that is old, strong, and virtuous in Japan, and stands as a symbol against Westernization and compromise. As such he is revered by the student radicals, the far right, and the Westernized but guilt-ridden sections of the middle class.

Koji Tsuruta, born in 1924, was the first *yakuza-eiga* star. He pioneered the personality of the *yakuza* hero. His portrayals of tormented, conscience-torn gangsters helped make the crucial transition from the pure samurai heroes of the Fifties to the compromised *yakuza* heroes of the Sixties. Tsuruta made his first film for Toei in 1953 and remains one of the foremost stars of the genre today. (Some of my Japanese friends report that the number one spot may be shifting back to him.) His most popular series is the BAKUTO series, also called BAKUCHI UCHI. During the Second World War Tsuruta was a kamikaze pilot whose mission was



The final fight. *Onna Toseinin. Otano Moshimasu.*



The final fight. *Hikagemono.*

The final fight. *Showa Zankyoden: Shinde Moraimasu.*



thwarted by the timely end of the war. Like Takakura he understates his acting and presents an unimpeachable image of duty and honor. If Takakura is similar to Newman and McQueen, then Tsurta resembles those older, more seasoned stars like Mitchum, Wayne, and Holden.

Junko Fujii is (or was) the third of Toei's triumvirate, the genre's leading female star and a screen presence quite unlike any other in the world. In her most famous series, *HIBOTAN BAKUTO* (THE RED PEONY GAMBLER), she plays Oryu the Red Peony, a young woman who is forced to become a *yakuza* to avenge her father's death. Unable to find a man brave and skilled enough to seek her revenge, she must repeatedly take on the man's duty. Because she takes on the man's role, she receives a great amount of abuse from villainous types, all of which she accepts with total graciousness and femininity. There is one chilling moment in *HIBOTAN BAKUTO: JINJI TOSHIMASU* (THE RED PEONY GAMBLER: TO SIDE WITH DUTY, 1971) where a geisha says to Oryu, "The Red Peony? I had expected a more manlike woman," and Oryu replies softly, "Never mind. I am a man." Because she has accepted the man's role she is unable to accept a lover of her own (just as male *yakuza* heroes are unable to live happily ever after); she must content herself with telling other women that "A woman is happiest when she gives herself to her lover." Therefore at the end of the film when she is allowed to wreak her revenge upon the villains, it comes with a singular vengeance. Taking long sword in hand she ruthlessly decimates her enemies, stabbing the evil *Oyabun* repeatedly even after he is dead. Western cinema has no equivalent for a gracious, polite woman who, given the proper circumstances, can exact violent physical revenge upon the men who oppress her without ever losing her sense of femininity. Unfortunately—and I'll make no comment on this—Fujii Junko retired two years ago at the age of twenty-eight and at the height of her popularity to get married.

Hideki Takahashi is the only non-Toei star to achieve major *yakuza-eiga* star status. He is a young Steve McQueen type of great promise. He seems less sensitive than Takakura but has more physical force. He formerly worked for Shochiku and Nikkatsu studios but is now a free agent. One of his best performances is in Kato's epic *JINSEI GEKIJŌ* (Shochiku, 1971).

Directors: *Tai Kato*, fifty-six years old, is the genre's leading director and considered by many to be the top commercial director in Japan. He is a free agent although he works primarily for Toei and Shochiku. He began directing in 1951 and has made thirty-seven films to date. In his films one can see the clearest examples of a Japanese expressionist

style. Kato seems to have evolved from a Delmer Daves to a Sergio Leone phase without ever experiencing the interim John Ford period; portions of *JINSEI GEKIJŌ* are very reminiscent of the best of Sergio Leone. His best films are *JINSEI GEKIJŌ* (Shochiku, 1971), *KUTSUKAKE TOKIJIRO: YUKYO IPPIKI* (Toei, 1966) *MEIJI KYOKAKUDEN: SANDAIME SHUMEI* (Toei, 1965), and *HIBOTAN BAKUTO: HANAFUDA SHOBU* (Toei, 1969).

Kosaku Yamashita is forty-three years old and is considered the best of the "new" directors. (All Japanese directors undergo a lengthy studio apprenticeship before they are allowed to direct.) He has only worked for Toei studios, for whom he began in 1960 and has directed forty-seven films to date. He was the first director to demonstrate the *yakuza-eiga* could be more than an exploitation genre, the first to construct individual tour-de-force scenes and to give more attention to the genre themes. Although his style is not as flashy and immediately identifiable as Kato's, his characters seem richer and more thought out. His staging of an exterior fight scene in *KYODAI JINJI* is the best I've seen in any *yakuza* film, and even in his most mediocre work there is at least one scene which shows his flair and finesse. Yamashita represents the best of Toei Studios and Toei executives quite proudly call him "pure Toei." His best films are *SEKI NO YATAPPE* (1963), *KYODAI JINJI* (1966), and *BAKUCHIUCHI: SOCHO TOBAKU* (1968).

Other directors are less interesting. Toei considers its three top directors to be Yamashita, Shingehiro Ozawa, and Masahiro Makino.

Shingehiro Ozawa, fifty years old, began for Toei in 1954 and has directed eighty films. He began as a screenwriter and remains to this day a consistently inventive writer and mediocre director.

Masahiro Makino, son of famous Japanese film pioneer Shozo Makino, is Toei's second workhorse. He began directing in 1951 and has made over sixty films. He directed Koji Tsurta's *JIROCHO* series in the early Sixties. His status as competent director and son of famous film pioneer makes him the rough equivalent of our Hank Williams, Jr.

Norifumi Suzuki. A better than average director whose fame rests primarily on the fact that he is Junko Fujii's uncle and launched her on her highly successful *HIBOTAN* series. His best film is *HIBOTAN BAKUTO: ISSUKU IPPAN*.

Kinji Fukasaku is another young better-than-average stable director for Toei. He is best known for his fine sense of color, and currently directs documentary-style *yakuza-eiga*.

Tomu Uchida. The old director of the legendary Japanese film *EARTH* (TSUCHI, Nikkatsu, 1939) directed several *yakuza-eiga* for Toei before he died in 1970 at

the age of 71. His 1968 version of Shiro Ozaki's novel *JINSEI GEKIJŌ* (subtitled *HISHAKAKU TO KIRATSUNE*) is particularly interesting.

Screenwriters: *Kazuo Kasahara*, *Koji Takada*, and *Tatsuo Nogami* are considered Toei's top three screenwriters. Ozawa should also be added even though he also works as a director, and also Suzuki for his scripting of the *HIBOTAN* series (the best *yakuza-eiga* series taken as a single unit).

Producer: *Kouji Shundo* is an ex-*yakuza* who became General Producer of Toei and is largely responsible for that studio's preëminence in the *yakuza-eiga*. He supervises the careers of Takakura and Tsurta, and produces all of Toei's top *yakuza* films.

● The important thing to remember about strict genre forms like *yakuza-eiga* is that these films are not necessarily individual works of art but instead variations on a complex tacit social metaphor, a secret agreement between the artists and the audiences of a certain period. When massive social forces are in flux, rigid genre forms often arise to help individuals make the transition. Americans created the Western to help codify a morality of the frontier; they created a gangster film to cope with the new social forces of the city. If the original social metaphor is valid, the resulting genre will long outlive the individual artists who created it—it may even outlive the times which evolved it. In the present personality-oriented culture, rigid genre forms are the closest thing we have to a popular "art without names."

When a new genre comes into being, one immediately suspects that its causes run far deeper than the imagination of a few astute artists and businessmen. The whole social fabric of a culture has been torn, and a new metaphor has arisen to help mend it.

The social structure of Japan has in fact been severely disrupted in recent years. Westernization, the rapid rise of Japanese capitalism, and the emergence of Japan as an economic superpower have further challenged those tattered traditional Japanese virtues which were able to survive the War, MacArthur, and the Occupation. The *yakuza-eiga* is a popular social contract between the artists and audiences of Japan to reevaluate and restructure these traditional virtues. The samurai film was no longer serving its intermediary function; new characters, themes and conventions had to be created. Just as early twentieth-century Americans needed the Western, contemporary Japanese need a genre which can serve as a moral battleground—a genre on which the traditional virtues of duty and humanity can fight to the death.