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

Koji Tsuruta in *Hiboton Bakuto: Isshuku Ippan*

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

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

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

All photos: Paul Schrader
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 hanasaitain 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.

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 blazed 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 hidori koto o shimasita. (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 gozans. (SUBTITLE: No man has a greater friend than Harry Kilmer.)
KILMER (bowing). Tanaka Ken-san ni motto ni aniki de gozans. (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 smear 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 yakusa-eiga) is, as a yakusa would say, a lone wolf in the clan of gangster films. The yakusa-eiga bears little resemblance to its American or European counterparts. The rules formulated by Robert Warshow 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 yakusa 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 yakusa-eiga chooses timelessness over relevance, myth over realism; it seeks not social commentary, but moral truth. Although the average yakusa 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 yakusa-eiga is a younger in the community of film genres. The first yakusa films appeared less than a decade ago, and it is only in the last few years that the yakusa-eiga has assumed the preeminent 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 yakusa-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 1984 all Japanaese sword films were jida-geki; period films. The government had banished the samurai and banned the long sword in 1688, and there were no films set in the post-1688 period in which the protagonists used long swords. By legal definition, the swordsman was an outlaw; no filmmaker wished to assign the samurai pure code of giri-ninjo ("duty-humaneiy") 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 yakusa, but there was always a clear distinction made between the code of the samurai and the code of the yakusa. There could also be realistic portrayals of yakusa—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 yakusa 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 yakusa-eiga, Toei Studios took the lead. The transition from jida-geki to yakusa-eiga can first be seen in the jirocho series produced by Toei from 1962 to 1964.

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

The first authentic yakusa film was BAKUTO (GAMBLER), directed in July 1964 by Shingohe Otsawa and starring Koji Tsutara. Otsawa had been directing period films for Toei since 1954, but after the success of BAKUTO he devoted himself exclusively to writing and directing yakusa films. Toei itself made only three pure yakusa films in 1954, but they were so well received that by 1956 Toei was in almost full-scale yakusa-eiga production.

The initial phase of yakusa-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 yakusa-eiga to period films, and one by one the older established directors were transferred to the new genre: Otsawa and Makino in 1964, Tai Kata and Tomu Uchida in 1965. Koji Tsutara was the major star of this first yakusa period, but he was soon joined by the other two stars of Toei's yakusa triumvirate: Ken Takakura and Junko Fuji.

The new genre was legitimized primarily by two films. ABASHIRI BANGAIKI (ABASHIRI PRISON), directed in April 1965 by Teruo Ishii and starring Ken Takakura, was the first great yakusa commercial hit. The Abashiri Prison story was so successful that Takakura has remade it eight 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 BANGAIKI clearly demonstrated that yakusa films had a far greater potential audience than anyone had imagined.

YUKIO IPPIKI: SEIKI NO YATATE, directed in January 1966 by Tai Kata and starring Kinnosuke Nakamura, was the first yakusa 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 yakusa-eiga enjoyed the blessings of large(r) budgets and mass audiences. It was now an authentic genre. Toei made twenty-six yakusa films in 1969 and considers it their peak year for profits. Yakusa films now used exterior locations (sparingly) and had a classier look. Yamashita's BAKUCHOU: SOCHO TOBAKU (GAMBLING HOUSE: PRESIDENTIAL GAMBLING), considered the "masterpiece" of the genre, was released in 1968. Also in 1968 Tohey Uchida, one of Japan's oldest and most respected directors, filmed one of the best yakusa films, JINSEI GEKU: HISHAKA KURIKOSU (THEATER OF LIFE: HISHAKU AND KIRI SUKE). 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 Daiei Studios all sunk money into yakusa productions. Shochiku's three-hour version of JINSEI GEKU: THEATER OF LIFE, directed by Kata in 1971, is certainly the most expensive and ambitious yakusa film thus far produced. It is also one of the best.

At the moment the yakusa-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" yakusa films. In these documentary-style films the setting of yakusa conflicts was updated from the "classical" period (1915-1935) to contemporary times. Whereas the classical-style yakusa films were open morality tales, the newer documentary-style films featured a far
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 KiriKomi-Tai [Gambler's Counterattack, 1971], for example, Tsuruta was forced to shoot a corrupt policeman in the back, an unforgivable breach of code for a samuraisque 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 (ninja). That the genre has two themes, giri and ninja, rather than one, giri-ninja, 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-ninja: 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-ninja 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.
This inhibiting syndrome was unravelled 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 *Kyōdai 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 evil *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 *kyōdai,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 human," 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 *Hishakakutu to Kiratsune,* "prison and death." Before he goes on his march to the final fight in the *Abashiri Bangaichi* series, Ken Taka-kura 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 successionship. Sembu, 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 Sembu's forces take over the syndicate. Nakai is then accused by Sembu 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 Sembu. "Where is

*Privately translated for the author.*

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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—the ones 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.


Junko Fuji reveals her tattoo in Hibotan Bakuto: Ishikuru Ippan. This is the only film in which the yakuza-woman shows any part of her body.
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 puffing and puffing, bully local merchants or workmen.
4. The gambling scene. Apart from their protection racket, yakuza clans make their money from gambling rooms. In the gambling scene colorful hanatuda 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 shoyaku 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 flattering 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 Tsutura and Takakura appear in from ten to fifteen films a year. Every two weeks a yakuza film plops 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 TOBUKU 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 filigree into the film so that it will not clog 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 Reawakening of the Tattoo, the Gambling Scene, or the Final Fight. Mad erratic splashs 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 Tsutura walks off in the final shot of Uchida's HISHAKU TO KIRATSUNE (a perfect example of a film where a major director concentrates 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.

Personality. 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 Tsutura, 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 BAN-GA-I CHIBO (ABASHIRI PRISON), NIHON KYOKASHI (JAPANESE CHIVALRY) and SHOWA ZANKYO DEN. "Star" is the best word to describe Takakura; he has a magical sense of presence, an ability to control the frame around him by pose, 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 reflectively and with great authority. Three books have been published about him in Japan, and he has achieved cult status. He represents something 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 Tsutura, 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. Tsutura 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 UC. During the Second World War Tsutura was a kamikaze pilot whose mission was...
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 Tsuruta resem- bles those older, more seasoned stars like Mitchum, Wayne, and Holden.

Juno Fuji 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 BAKU TO: JUNO TOSHIKURO (THE RED PEONY GAMBLER: TO SING 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 man who oppresses her without ever losing her sense of femininity. Unfortunately—and I’ll make no comment on this—Fuji Junko retired two years ago at the age of twenty-eight and at the height of her popularity to get married.

Hidetki 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 GEKIJO (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 GEKIJO are very reminiscent of the best of Sergio Leone. His best films are JINSEI GEKIJO (Shochiku, 1971), KUTSUWAKE TO- KURIRO: YUKO YOPIKI (Toei, 1966) MEJI KYOKAKUDE: SANDAIMAE SHUMEI (Toei, 1965), and HIBOTAN BAKUTO: HANAFUDA SHOBO (Toei, 1969).

Kosaku Yamashita is thirty-four 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 fortyseven 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 tourist-destination 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 YATARPE (1963), KYODAI JINJI (1964), and BAKUCHUICHU: 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 mediocredirector.

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 Tsuruta’s JIROCHO series in the early Sixties. His status as a competent director and son of famous film pioneer makes him the rough equivalent of our Hank Williams, Jr.

Noritumi Suzuki. A better than average director whose fame rests primarily on the fact that he is Junko Fuji’s uncle and launched her on her highly successful HIBOTAN series. His best film is HIBOTAN BAKUTO: ISSUKU IPAN.

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 GEKIJO (subtitled HISHAKU TO KIRATSUNE) is particularly interesting.

Screenwriters: Kazuo Kasahara, Koji Takada, and Tatsuo Nomura 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: Koji Shundo is an ex-yakuza who became General Producer of Toei and is largely responsible for that studio’s preeminence in the yakuza-eiga. He supervises the careers of Takakura and Tsuruta, 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.