

## Giri Haji or Duty and Shame

Albert Thai, January 24 2023

A friend of mine had told me about this series that he loved for many reasons, including the various British accents (British only, neither of us are English native speakers, and neither of us speak Japanese), so I said, I'll give it a try.

I hadn't really been impressed by Tokyo Vice, which is also about culture shock leading to culture clash, with an American in a strange land (but he should be well-equipped to "integrate", as he could speak Japanese and so work as a journalist for a Japanese newspaper). I couldn't really be interested in the characters and I must say I found Ansel Elgort, erm, irritating, with his bouncing gait (and he is too often shown bouncing here and there!), he is more of a bumbling fool than a character in development, and his character is so adamant he could enlighten his Japanese counterparts and change their views and methods. I liked him though in the Fault in Our Stars and Baby Driver, not so much in West Side Story, although he admittedly sang better than Richard Beymer who was only asked to lip-sync.

Giri Haji is not just about doing your duty, or the alternative, feeling shame for not sticking to the rules. It is more about human beings trying to cope, in their different ways, with their emotions, feelings, and with... each other. And in the end, if some characters get their come-uppance, in a traditional way, others are more sinned against than sinning and yet meet bad ends. And all the human interactions seem to be the illustration of that saying, "the pebble in the pond and the ripples that it makes". It is not just about following a code, or betraying a code and getting punished for that, as in any Christian, or otherwise, predetermined code : if you stray, you will pay the price.

And one thing I love about the series is that I sometimes feel like giving some characters a box on the ear or a kick in the butt, so annoying are they, but somehow, at times, I can feel some fellowship with them, some empathy, even sympathy.

Let's take Sarah, the detective, and her impossible accent (thanks Netflix for your English subtitles, with them, I can hear everything!). Her boyfriend Ian (also a policeman) is cheating on her, and with a colleague at that! So she is snitching on him and sends him to jail for planting evidence to send a drug lord to jail. No, no, Ian did not share the same cell as the drug lord and... Then she teaches a course for foreign detectives, there is some sort of exchange program, and one British detective also goes to Japan... Well, there she meets Kenzo, the Japanese detective who is sent to London on a secret mission (the official reason being to attend those courses), to bring home his Yakuza brother Yuto, who had been ordered by his clan to execute a Japanese living in London for a transgression of some kind. And somehow, she falls for Kenzo and shelters him **and** his brother. Her ex-boyfriend who had finished his term in jail takes pictures of Sarah and the bad company she keeps, and threatens to tell the police. And they meet in a bar, and Ian's arguments are, he broke the law, but in order to put a drug lord in jail (and we all know that drug lords, rich criminals can afford the very best lawyers on the market, don't we?), so what is her argument? And it is as if she were totally deaf, she turns into a one-track woman, she pleads, not her innocence, but her right to be happy, she has never been so happy before, and she has a right to... Didn't I mention before a box on the ear or a kick somewhere? She is ridiculous, and yet, it's all part of our human condition, isn't it?

And as poor Ian leaves, he is soon stopped by cops who find some drugs on him, drugs that have been planted there by Taki (Kenzo's daughter) following the suggestion of Rodney, the homosexual escort-boy who could introduce Kenzo to some private clubs (but even that is not...) and who somehow has become a familiar (as in familiar spirit) of that heterogeneous crew, and who believes that is the best way of getting Ian out of the way, but Ian runs away from the cops and is hit by a car and dies. Of course, Rodney is so sorry, he didn't mean it. Acts and consequences, the ripples in the pond, but not necessarily retribution or redemption. The characters can be sorry for what they have done, but they can't undo it, and if they don't bear the consequences, lucky they! They could always shrug it off, shit just happens, man!

Some characters are so full of themselves. The younger set may have the excuse of youth, ignorance. Taki does not care at all about the fact she could hurt parents, grand-mother, she is set in her ways, this is my right, you have hurt me, so I don't care if I hurt you. Rodney goes to one of those meetings with fellow sufferers, but, again, he is so full of himself that against all rules, he interrupts the one who is talking, and explains why... He might be right about self-loathing (which might be the other side of self-loving), but if he knows it so well, why can't he do anything about it? Aye, and there is the rub. Knowing is not understanding, and understanding does not necessarily lead to acting upon it!

You have those who use the code to their own advantages, because it is a way for them to right what they perceive as a wrong, even it is very personal, and those characters don't care about the dreadful consequences on the rest of society.

Then you have that chubby Japanese detective in Tokyo, he is Kenzo's friend, he is the only one that is really trustworthy, he helps his friend, and he knows that, sometimes, there are compromises, but he never loses sight of the bigger picture. And that detective is no craven wimp, even though he looks more like a pen-pusher than the gun-toting law-enforcer à la Clint Eastwood and his Inspector Harry, and he uses his gun to do what he thinks is right to prevent an all-out war between the Yakuza gangs, saving the leader of a gang from the killers sent by the other big boss, only to be the target of the boss he had saved, but... And the British inspector in that exchange program who the Japanese detective enrolls in his non-sanctioned move also looks tame and helpless enough, but there's also more to him than meets the eye...

And on a very superficial level, you also have the characters who blindly and unquestioningly follow the code, like those Yakuza killers who live and die by the code, mere robots.

And you have those wonderful women in Kenzo's family who do anything they can to save Yuto's girlfriend and their baby, so there are some comic scenes, but nothing dumb or outlandish.

There are scenes that seamlessly move from their reality to a remembrance of things past, or to a much wished for reunion, where things would have been different, as when Rodney "sees" Tiff, who had committed suicide; Tiff was the sex-partner he had rejected for apparently no reason, after "using" him. And towards the end, when everybody (even those who are not "actually" there) gets into some sort of dance, that imaginary sequence has been, so to speak, announced, and is not shocking: we human beings are so short-lived, even if compared to fireflies we are immortal, and our feelings and emotions sometimes clash with the world around us, no matter where we live, or the position we have in our society. And that moment of fantasized euphoria (the characters', the director's?) is short-lived too. The robotic yakuza henchmen want to kill and are killed.

All in all, I liked the series very much. Tarentino is always so interested in showing how smart he is, he often forgets his subject, and many scenes in his films end up in a grotesque way, killing all emotion. Not so here. Joe Barton (I had never heard of him, but this is no judgement on my part, there is only so much that even a retired teacher can watch on TV) has managed to direct a series that is more subtle than it might seem, with a touch of welcome humour, and he has managed to create characters that are far from being role-models. But they look and act like human beings, even if there are human beings we don't want to keep company with!