

THE LAST SAMURAI Confused About American-Japanese Relations?

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The Last Samurai is a bizarre, confused, and ultimately incoherent film about a U.S. army captain (Nathan Algren/ Tom Cruise) from the famed 7th cavalry brought to Japan in 1876 to supervise the creation of an American-like (read: modern and Western) imperial army whose initial purpose in the film is to fight against traditionalists led by spiritual/ samurai leader Katsumoto played by Ken Watanabe^[1]. The first engagement between the opposing forces is disastrous for the still ill-prepared imperial army and the American captain is captured by the band of samurai. They take him to a remote village where he comes to respect them and their noble way of life (one in which honor and spirituality dominate) and eventually joins them in their fight to stop the ‘Americanization’ of Japan. The sole survivor of a massacre—worthy of Peckinpah—, Captain Algren, becomes in effect (and in the end) the ‘last samurai’.

The interesting question, of course, is what motivates Captain Algren to join forces with the samurai in the first place? Or, to put it differently: why would a contemporary American film offer a critique of the Americanization/ modernization of 19th century Japan? Is this a ‘politically correct’ critique of American imperialism? And if so, why does it endorse Japanese imperialism (the samurai in the film are still loyal to Emperor Meiji, even though they oppose his ministers)? Isn’t the very idea of an emperor/ living-god (whom the film’s American hero pledges to serve at the end) anti-republican? Working our way through such questions the strangeness of the film’s confused project begins to unravel.

A key figure in this project is the American Indian. The first shots of the film show the samurai leader Katsumoto meditating in nature while, cross-cut with them, are images showing the ‘contents’ of his meditation; music that connotes the spirituality of the moment accompanies the scene. Nature, spirituality, the simple and good life, discipline, honor: one immediately realizes that the cinematic terms of reference, the terms under which we are meant to understand the samurai, are those of the noble savage of revisionist western films (from *Cheyenne Autumn* to *Dances With Wolves*). Not surprisingly this is evidenced by the title’s intertextual connection to Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. The connection is made explicit when we learn that captain Algren is haunted by his participation in the massacre of an Indian village inhabited mostly by defenseless women and children. Though he is celebrated as a war hero, the events have nonetheless left him in a state of cynical and drunken selffloating. But while the film’s thematic vocabulary is clearly borrowed from the western, the displacement of the typical *western* conflict between Indians and whites to a conflict between traditionalism and modernization in the *Far-East* dramatically changes the meaning of this vocabulary^[2].

For in simple-mindedly taking the side of traditionalism over modernization (itself an important theme in post-war Japanese cinema), the film ends up endorsing the development of the right-wing, conservative, anti-Western, nationalist, militarist, and imperialist Japanese politics of the Showa era (whose conditions of possibility lay in the Meiji period—the period depicted in *The Last Samurai*), the very politics that eventually

led to, among other things, the annexation of Korea to Japan in 1910, the bloody Sino-Japanese war of the 30s and even to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Of course, as one would expect, the film's 'critique' of modernism is overlaid with (American) populism: the villains are proto-bourgeois Japanese ministers (read: bureaucrats) acting out of greed and a thirst for power, while the heroes truly represent the 'people' (peasants bow to them) and are seen to work for the good of the Nation. The utter (political, historical, and cultural) confusion of the film thus comes in good measure from presenting the politics of Japanese Fascism through the terms of reference and celebration of the American Indian over the Western way of life and from critiquing the introduction of a Western military into Japan—ironically the very sort of military that merged with the ultraconservative Fascist ideology of the 30s. (Add to this the fact that the ultra-conservative and anti-Western samurai Katsumoto is able to speak English with his American captive and you have a good idea of a script that has no clear idea of what it is doing).

How then are we to explain the film's own ideological project, its place in a world ever more dominated by American imperialism? In many ways the film is incoherent on this ground: while it critiques American militarism it celebrates a Japanese discourse that leads straight to imperialism, Fascism and militarism. More strangely still, it romanticizes the samurai by connecting him to the underdog plight and struggle of the American Indian and therefore turns him (against any sense of historical veracity) into a victim of unjust oppression in order to better endorse conservative politics. Dressed up so that it might appear as a critique of American imperialism, the film, it turns out, does quite the opposite. Of course, one cannot help but wonder whether such incoherence is of the same sort that blurs the boundaries between democratic and Fascist tendencies in American politics today...

FOOTNOTES

1 In reality, during the Meiji reform the Japanese army modeled itself on the French and Prussian armies while the navy adopted the British model.

2 Of course, the film's iconographic vocabulary of samurai sword play is borrowed from the samurai film genre. That the samurai and western genres have often been compared (*The Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo*, which would eventually be remade as westerns, immediately

come to mind) is not irrelevant to this film.