Geisha, Gangsters, and Samurai: Japan in Western Film

Section 1
Instructor/Title  | Mark Hollstein, Ph.D./Associate Professor

Course Outline:
Since the earliest days of cinema, Westerners filmmakers have used Japan as a mirror in which to reflect upon their own cultures. At times they have portrayed Japan as the model society that lays bare Western failures. At other times they have imagined the country as a corrupt world whose degenerate nature reinforces the superiority of Western values. Through it all has been a highly gendered narrative—Japan as the paradoxical land of ultra-feminine geisha (soft, gentle and nurturing) and extremely masculine samurai and gangsters (cold, unyielding and dangerous). This course looks at how and why these contradictory images so easily coexist within the Western cinematic imagination. Of central concern is the way in which filmmakers have emphasized, exaggerated, distorted or ignored various aspects of Japanese culture to meet the expectations of their audiences, and the ways in which images of Japan, constructed in response to specific historical situations are recycled to justify or explain later situations. We will also consider how changes in class, gender and race relations in the West have influenced media images of the Japanese Other.

Section 2
Course Objectives:
This course will enable students to understand and use concepts such as Orientalism, Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Colonialism. They will also be able to explain how Western images of Japan have been constructed in response to specific historical situations, and how those images have evolved and have been recycled to justify or explain later socio-political conditions. This course will also help students be better informed consumers of popular culture who can identify how issues of race, gender and class inform media narratives.

Section 3
Class Schedule:
Mon. 9/3: Course Introduction


Optional Reading: “An Unfathomable Planet,” from The Idea of Japan, by Ian Littlewood.

Mon. 9/10: Lost in Translation (Sofia Coppola, dir. 2003)

Read: “Chapter One: Individuality," from The Soul of the Far East, by Percival Lowell.

Mon. 9/17:  
*Madame Butterfly* (Frederic Mitterrand, dir. 1995)

Read: "Scream of the Butterfly," from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti.

Wed. 9/19:  
*My Geisha* (Jack Cardiff, dir., 1961)


Mon. 9/24:  
*Sayonara* (Joshua Logan, dir., 1957)


Wed. 9/26:  
Read: “Tragic and Transcendent Love” from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti.

Mon. 10/1:  
*Fukushima Mon Amour* (Doris Dörrie, dir., 2016)


Wed. 10/3:  
Read: “From Hiroshima to Fukushima Mon Amour,” by Mark Hollstein

**Gangsters, Villains and Enemies**

Mon. 10/8:  
*The Cheat* (Cecil B. DeMille, dir., 1915)

Read: “The Rape Fantasy in *The Cheat and Broken Blossoms,*” from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti, pp. 11-32.

Wed. 10/10:  
Read: “The Rape Fantasy in *The Cheat and Broken Blossoms,*” from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti, pp. 32-45.

Mon. 10/15:  
*Why We Fight, The Battle for China* (Frank Capra, dir., 1943)

Read: “Patterns of a Race War,” from *War Without Mercy*, by John Dower.

Wed. 10/17:  
*Know Your Enemy Japan* (Frank Capra, dir., 1945)

Read: “Know Your Enemy” from *War Without Mercy*, by John Dower.

Mon. 10/22:  
Various WWII Movies and Cartoons

Read: “Will this Picture Help Win the War?” from *Hollywood Goes to War*, by Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black.
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Wed. 10/24  **Midterm Exam and Discussion**

Mon. 10/29: **No Class (Fall Break)**


Mon. 11/5: **Rising Sun** (Phillip Kaufman, dir., 1993)

**Read:** “Samurai in Suits” from *The Idea of Japan*, by Ian Littlewood.

Wed. 11/7: **The Cove** (Louis Psihoyos, dir., 2009)


Mon. 11/12: **Read:** “Failing Flipper: How *The Cove* has Empowered the Taiji Dolphin Slaughter,” by Mark Hollstein

Samurai

Wed. 11/14: **The Last Samurai** (Edward Zwick, dir., 2003)


Wed. 11/21: **Kill Bill** (Quentin Tarantino, dir., 2003)

Mon. 11/26: **Read:** “Themes of Whiteness in *Bulletproof Monk, Kill Bill, and The Last Samurai*” by Sean M. Tierney.


Viewing Ourselves Through the Japanese Other

Wed. 12/5: **Japanese Story** (Sue Brooks, dir., 2003)

Final Essay Due

Mon. 12/10: **Read:** “Misunderstanding the Other: Colonial Fantasies in Japanese Story” by Peter Mathews, from *Anitpodes*, December 2009.

Wed. 12/12: **Cold Fever** (Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, dir., 1996)
Mon. 12/17: Read: “On the Road to Death and Discovery with the Japanese Other,” by Mark Hollstein

**Reading Materials:**
All reading assignments will be available in the “Assignments” section of Blackboard from which they can be downloaded and printed or read online.

**Section 4 Grading:**
- Midterm Exam: 25%
- Final Exam: 25%
- Midterm Essays: 20%
- Final Essays: 20%
- Participation: 10%

**Readings:**
All reading assignments will be available in the “Assignments” section of Blackboard, from which they can be downloaded or read online.

**Exams:**
The midterm and final exam will consist mainly of about 40 objective (matching, multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, true-and-false) questions.

**Midterm and Final Essays:**
At least one week before the due date, you will be given a set of four or five essay questions from which you will chose one to answer in about 4 to 5 double-spaced pages. You will be asked to comment on one or more of the films discussed in class and relate it to the assigned readings and one or more of the optional readings available on Blackboard. You should also offer some of your own observations and thoughts about the film you discuss. Your responses will be graded on how fully you answer the question, how well you demonstrate an understanding of the main concepts related to it and how well you make use of the relevant readings.

**Participation:**
The roll will be circulated at the beginning of each class. If you are late, it is your responsibility to talk to me after class and make sure that you have been marked present. If you cannot attend a class, please see me or email me sometime before the period you will miss to see if your absence can be excused. However, attendance alone is not sufficient to receive full credit; it is equally important that you contribute regularly to class discussions by asking questions or offering your own observations regarding the readings and films.