

Geisha, Gangsters, and Samurai: Japan in Western Film

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Course Description

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

- Lecture 1: Course Introduction
- Lecture 2: **Read:** "The Question of Category," from *The Idea of Japan*, by Ian Littlewood and "The White Man's Burden," by Rudyard Kipling.
Optional Reading: "An Unfathomable Planet," from *The Idea of Japan*, by Ian Littlewood.
- Lecture 3: *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, dir. 2003)
Read: "Chapter One: Individuality," from *The Soul of the Far East*, by Percival Lowell.
- Lecture 4: **Read:** "Totally Lost in Translation," Kiku Day, *The Guardian*, January 24, 2004, and "Is Lost in Translation Racist?" E. Koohan Paik, asianamericanfilm.com.

Geisha

- Lecture 5: ***Madame Butterfly*** (Frederic Mitterrand, dir. 1995)
Read: "Scream of the Butterfly," from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti.
- Lecture 6: ***My Geisha*** (Jack Cardiff, dir., 1961)
Read: "'Return of the Butterfly' The Geisha Masquerade in My Geisha and American Geisha," from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti.
- Lecture 7: ***Sayonara*** (Joshua Logan, dir., 1957)
Read: "A Bevy of Damsels" and "Cultural Penetration" from *The Idea of Japan*, by Ian Littlewood.
- Lecture 8: **Read:** "Tragic and Transcendent Love" from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti.
- Lecture 9: ***Fukushima Mon Amour*** (Doris Dörrie, dir., 2016)
Read: "Fukushima, Mon Amour is shot through with the shadow of Hiroshima," by Edmond Lee, *South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2016; and "'Fukushima, mon amour' Doris Dörrie's two-hander offers a refreshingly quirky perspective on a heavy subject," by Maggie Lee, *Variety*, February 14, 2016.
- Lecture 10: **Read:** "From *Hiroshima* to *Fukushima Mon Amour*," by Mark Hollstein

Gangsters, Villains and Enemies

- Lecture 11: ***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.
- Lecture 12: **Read:** "The Rape Fantasy in *The Cheat* and *Broken Blossoms*," from *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, by Gina Marchetti, pp. 32-45.
- Lecture 13: ***Why We Fight, The Battle for China*** (Frank Capra, dir., 1943)
Read: "Patterns of a Race War," from *War Without Mercy*, by John Dower.
- Lecture 14: ***Know Your Enemy, Japan*** (Frank Capra, dir., 1945)
Read: "Know Your Enemy" from *War Without Mercy*, by John Dower.
- Lecture 15: **Various WWII Movies and Cartoons**
Read: "Will this Picture Help Win the War?" from *Hollywood Goes to War*, by Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black.
- Lecture 16: **Midterm Exam and Discussion**
- Lecture 17: **No Class (Fall Break)**
- Lecture 18: **Read:** "Back to the Yellow Peril?" from *The Idea of Japan*, from *The Idea of Japan*, by Ian Littlewood.
- Lecture 19: ***Rising Sun*** (Phillip Kaufman, dir., 1993)

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

- Lecture 20: *The Cove* (Louis Psihoyos, dir., 2009)
Read: “*The Cove*,” Review by Gabriel Rubin in *Peace Studies Journal*; “*The Cove*,” Review by Laura Shields in *Journal of Critical Animal Studies* and “Stop the annual Taiji dolphin massacre, make your children proud,” by Deb Bowen-Saunders from the *Japan Times*, September 11, 2012.
- Lecture 21: **Read:** “Failing Flipper: How *The Cove* has Empowered the Taiji Dolphin Slaughter,” by Mark Hollstein

Samurai

- Lecture 22: *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, dir., 2003)
Read: “*The Last Samurai*” Review by Thomas Keirstead in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (April 2004).
- Lecture 23: **Read:** “Making a Samurai Western: Japan and the White Samurai Fantasy” by Mina Shin, from *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 43, no. 5 (2010)
- Lecture 24: *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino, dir., 2003)
- Lecture 25: **Read:** “Themes of Whiteness in *Bulletproof Monk*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai*” by Sean M. Tierney.
- Lecture 26: *Isle of Dogs* (Wes Anderson, dir. 2018)
Read: “Wes Anderson’s *Isle of Dogs* is Often Captivating but Cultural Sensitivity Gets Lost in Translation,” by Justin Chang, *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2018.
- Lecture 27: **Read:** “What *Isle of Dogs* Gets Right About Japan,” by Moeko Fujii, *The New Yorker*, April 13, 2018. And “Why is Wes Anderson’s ‘Isle of Dogs’ set in Japan? We’re not sure either,” by Angie Han, mashable.com, March 24, 2018.

Viewing Ourselves Through the Japanese Other

- Lecture 28: *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, dir., 2003)
Final Essay Due
- Lecture 29: **Read:** “Misunderstanding the Other: Colonial Fantasies in Japanese Story” by Peter Mathews, from *Anitpodes*, December 2009.
- Lecture 30: *Cold Fever* (Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, dir., 1996)
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%

Section 5

Additional Information

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 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.