From the Exotic to the Ordinary: Japan in American Films

by Bernard Susser

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Japan and Japanese culture have been taken up in many Hollywood films over the years; however, the way Japan has been represented has gone through some interesting changes. One extreme might be the recent *Memoirs of a Geisha* [*Sayuri*] (2005), a Hollywood film set in Japan with almost no reference to Westerners. The other extreme is represented by *Ronin* (1998), an action film set in Europe that has nothing to do with Japan, except for its title and a short scene in which a Frenchman explains the story of *Chūshingura*. Between these two extremes are films that are set in Japan for no particular reason; the story and the action might just as well have taken place in Hong Kong or Sydney or Paris. *House of Bamboo* (1955) is an early example; the title word "bamboo" gives a sense of the exotic although the film itself is a standard crime story. A more recent example is *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006), which is one of a series of films about car racing; there is no important reason in the story why the location has to be Japan.

Then there are many films that deal with cross-cultural communication and misunderstanding between Japanese and Americans. An early example is *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958), with John Wayne playing Townsend Harris, the first US official to reside in Japan. One feature of films like these is that part of the story involves teaching Americans about Japanese culture: In *The Yakuza* (1975), Takakura Ken explains the gangster's code to Robert Mitchum; 14 years later, in *Black Rain* (1989), Takakura Ken is explaining to Michael Douglas how the Japanese police operate. Explanations about Japanese culture are also a main theme of *The Karate Kid* (1984) and its sequels. In *Rising Sun* (1993), Japanese culture is again being explained to Americans but this time the sensei is Sean Connery! The most recent example of this type is *The Last Samurai* (2003), in which Tom Cruise plays an American soldier who takes part in a fictionalized Satsuma Rebellion; Watanabe Ken teaches him the values of the samurai.

My favorite films on the theme of cross-cultural (mis) communication are Mr. *Baseball* and *Gung Ho*. In *Mr. Baseball* (1992), Tom Selleck plays an American baseball
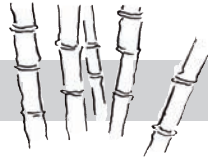
player who is traded to the Chunichi Dragons and must learn how to adjust to Japanese culture and Japanese baseball; the sensei is again Takakura Ken. In *Gung Ho* (1986), an American automobile plant is taken over by a Japanese company; this film draws its humor from the difficulties that both sides have in learning to adjust to each other's culture. The key point in both of these films is that both Americans and Japanese are stereotyped, which helps us see through the stereotypes.

Unfortunately, American films have not completely escaped from portraying Japan and Japanese in a stereotypical way. The comic portrayal of the Japanese photographer by Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), complete with thick glasses, yukata, and bonsai, is a cheap attempt at humor that borders on racism, and the Japanese company in *Robocop 3* (1993) is quite evil. Even a more recent film, Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), has been accused of racism for its sarcastic descriptions of aspects of modern Japan. Not everyone agrees with this criticism; my own objection to this film is rather with its use of Japan as the "mysterious Orient," as in the scene where Scarlett Johansson walks across the stepping stones in the Heian Shrine garden just to create an "exotic" mood.

One other trend in Hollywood films is just the reverse of this kind of Orientalism: Japan is treated as ordinary, showing that Americans are not surprised or impressed by an encounter with Japanese culture, but accept it as a typical event in their own increasingly globalized culture. These films have nothing to do with Japan or Japanese culture in terms of their locations or stories; mentions of Japan are incidental, and therefore ordinary. A typical example is the introductory scene of *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974), in which Walter Matthau is giving a guided tour of the New York subway system to some Japanese officials when the action starts. In the same way, near the beginning of *Fatal Attraction* (1987), a man in kimono appears in a scene at a publisher's party in New York; he is the author of a book about an "ancient samurai exercise manual." Another example is the setting of *Die Hard* (1988) in the Los Angeles headquarters of a Japanese corporation; the executive offices have some Oriental-looking decorations and a miniature Japanese garden. When the hero of *Crocodile Dundee II* (1988) is in a New York City subway station, two elderly Japanese tourists ask him (in Japanese!) to take a souvenir picture of them. In *Hard To Kill* (1990), Steven Seagal recuperates in a house in California that has a tatami room (of course, Seagal lived in Japan before his Hollywood career). There is a scene in *The Bodyguard* (1992) in which Kevin Costner takes Whitney Houston to see Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (English title: *The Bodyguard*). *Contact* (1997) is an SF film that has nothing to do with Japan but there is a scene in which Jodie Foster is in a room in Japan, wearing a kimono and staring at a hanging scroll.

Hopefully Western films that take up Japan and Japanese culture as a theme will continue to improve and avoid the mistakes and stereotypes that have characterized such films up to now. At the same time, I hope that American audiences will become even more used to the presence of Japanese cultural elements in every kind of film, as a confirmation of the internationalization of American culture.

Note: I would like to express thanks to my seminar students who over the years have discovered many of the scenes mentioned above.