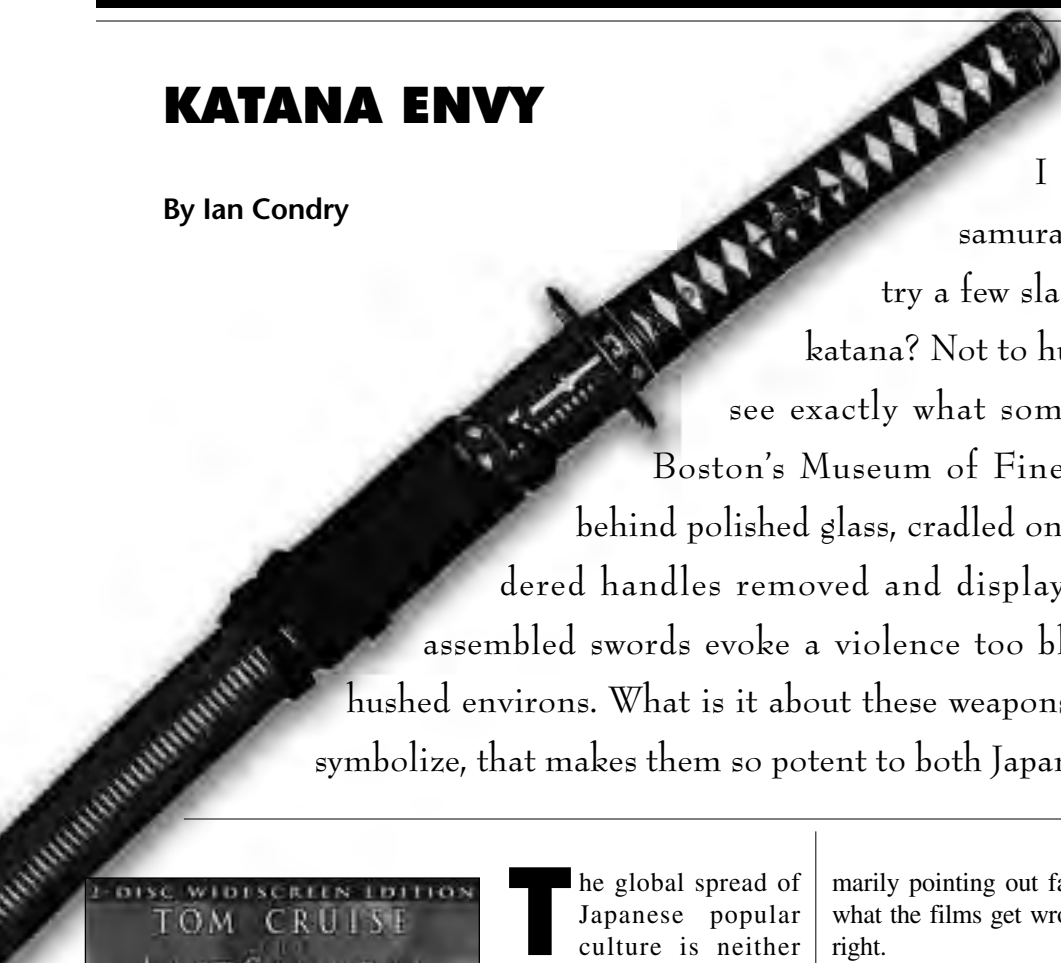


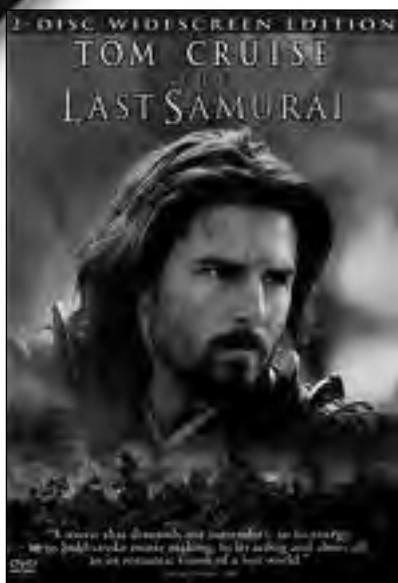
ESSAY FILM REVIEW

KATANA ENVY

By Ian Condry



I confess I've got something for samurai swords. Who wouldn't want to try a few slashing parries with a razor-sharp katana? Not to hurt anyone, of course, but just to see exactly what something like that could cut. In Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, samurai blades beckon behind polished glass, cradled on plexiglass stands, their embroidered handles removed and displayed separately, as if the fully-assembled swords evoke a violence too bloody, too immediate, for such hushed environs. What is it about these weapons, and the samurai warriors they symbolize, that makes them so potent to both Japanese and Westerners?



The global spread of Japanese popular culture is neither new, nor exclusively Japanese, but what is new is a sense that in today's media-saturated world, cultural communication is central to business and politics in previously unrecognized ways. For some, trade in Japanese culture represents a political "soft power" that makes Japan, and Japan's national interests, attractive. Others see a marketing brand of "gross national cool" to be exploited for business purposes. Some businesspeople

say Japan, even more than the US, is a touchstone for global, especially youth culture, trends. All of sudden, culture is cool. Can samurai tell us something about the power of cool going global?

After watching a recent spate of samurai-related films from both the US and Japan, I was struck by how, as a teacher of Japanese culture, my initial reaction is to point out all things the films get wrong, and how my students couldn't care less. I'm beginning to think there may be more productive ways of relating these pop culture icons that are part historical abomination, part cultural utopia, to the work we do as teachers. With the new cross-disciplinary interest in culture, I also think cultural scholars can contribute more than pri-

marily pointing out faults. For what is interesting is not so much what the films get wrong, but the things they deem essential to get right.

Take director Edward Zwick's 2003 film *The Last Samurai*, starring Tom Cruise and Watanabe Ken, which is, despite all its faults, deeply seductive, in part because of its (excuse the pun) cutting-edge action scenes. Yes, history is trampled, and cliches from the tea ceremony to ninja are abundant, but what is especially striking is the way the warriors stand for one, homogeneous thing: Japan's old ways, symbolized by the sword, meaning loyalty, honor, and bravery. The West, with its cannons and Gatling guns, is drunken, effeminate, cowardly, and cheap.

The 2002 film *Twilight Samurai* (*Tasogare Seibei*), starring Sanada Hiroyuki (also in *The Last Samurai*), is a remarkable contrast because it takes place in roughly the same nineteenth century period, only here slightly before rather than slightly after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This film, directed by Yamada Yoji, who also produced the Tora-san series, is in ways sentimental (the lead samurai is a good father and a feminist who encourages his young daughters to attend



school), but is also steely-eyed in its portrayal of the class antagonisms that helped bring down the Shogunate military rule. “Twilight” himself, ridiculed by his fellows for not keeping up samurai appearances, is a humble, poverty-stricken, widower samurai, whose sword skills stand not simply for “honor” but for one of several competing visions of what is honorable.

One difference between the two films is the sense of social depth one gets in the ways the narrative is constructed, which in a way echoes a difference between how anthropologists view culture, and how I see culture being represented in the debates over soft power, or national culture as a marketing brand. In *Twilight Samurai*, the sword and Twilight’s skills with it are central, but in the background dead children keep floating by on the river. While the samurai bureaucrats are counting their stores and flirting with geisha, the farmers are in the midst of a severe famine. In *The Last Samurai*, the samurai village is a picture of the warrior’s life as zen poetry, and the East/West divide is paramount. In *Twilight*, it’s samurai against samurai, honor against honor, in a way that more deeply captures the contradictions of the cultural worlds we try to describe, as opposed to identifying a singular “Japanese culture” that exerts soft power beyond its borders. Showing the ideological processes at work in these different representations is perhaps more instructive than highlighting the errors.

The 2003 American *Kill Bill, Vol. 1*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, and the 2003 Japanese *Zatōichi*, directed by Kitano Takeshi, present yet another contrast, and though both dwell on the beauty of slicing through bodies, there is again the sense that they are not equally Japanese. Both share a fascination with fighting over social commentary, spectacle effects over realism, but they diverge in the ways social setting is related to their respective mythologies.

These differences present a pivot around which deeper cultural analysis can ensue, highlighting patterns in American preconceptions and Japanese elaborations of the samurai mythos.

My own personal favorite of the American-Japanese hybrid is director Jim Jarmusch’s 1999 *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, in which Forest Whitaker plays a present-day samurai hit man in New York City, who admires “ancient Japan” and reads from the *Hagakure*, an eighteenth century meditation on the way of the samurai (a work dictated, incidentally, by a feeble monk in times of peace, and which became popular centuries later). Writer/director Jim Jarmusch captures tensions between white mafiosos, an African-American hit man, and even Native Americans, in ways that do justice to some of the complexity of “the way” while also highlighting communication problems across languages and cultures.



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ESSAY FILM REVIEW



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The film directors, politicians, and the businesspeople attending to “cool Japan” are on to something, but whether it’s “soft power,” “cultural hybridization,” or what have you depends on a deeper analysis of the links between cultural production, markets, and fan communities. Since what’s “cool” is what works among one’s peers, I imagine a day when stereotypical images are less arresting than they are today. What we are witnessing, one hopes, are steps, baby steps maybe, towards deeper

cultural understanding. Machete hacks as practice for more subtle dissection, perhaps? The stereotypes portrayed in the films are disturbing, especially to those of us who aim to teach more nuanced approaches to culture, but I believe we can learn from these pop vehicles, not only from the “mistakes” they make in their representations, but in the reasons they attract audiences.

There is a kind of complex dance between exoticism and a sense of “they are people just like us” that these films struggle with, and the aims, if not styles, are somewhat comparable to the ethnographies we use in classrooms. By providing contexts, theories for thinking about culture, and practical activities in exploring the ways our understandings are limited, we can make films like these, and swords in the museum, teaching tools, not only for their examples of what they get “right” and “wrong,” but for what they tell us about our own desires and the channels that carry these images to broad audiences. My guess is, there’s a little *katana* envy in all of us. ■

FILMOGRAPHY

All the films listed below are available in DVD format with English subtitles from Amazon.com.

The Last Samurai (2003)

Director: Edward Zwick
Starring: Ken Watanabe, Tom Cruise
154 minutesE

The Twilight Samurai (Tasogare Seibei) (2002)

Director: Yoji Yamamoto
Starring: Hiroyuki Sanada, Rie Miyazawa
129 minutesE

Kill Bill, Vol. 1 (2003)

Director: Quentin Tarantino
Starring: Uma Thurman, Lucy Liu
111 minutesE

Zatōichi (2003)

Director: Takeshi Kitano
Starring: Beat Takeshi, Tadanobu Asano
116 minutes

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai (1999)

Director: Jim Jarmusch
Starring: Forest Whitaker, John Tormey
116 minutes

IAN CONDRY is Assistant Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Foreign Languages and Literatures, where he teaches courses in popular culture, transnational media, and globalization. He is currently writing a book about hip-hop in Japan. Recently published articles include “Cultures of Music Piracy” in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and an essay on Japanese hip-hop fans in the edited volume *Fanning the Flames: Fandoms and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan* (William W. Kelly, ed., State University of New York Press, 2004). Web site: <http://iancondry.com>.

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