

The New York Times

Arts and Leisure Desk; SECT2

Land Of the Rising Cliche

By MOTOKO RICH; Lukas Schwarzacher and Fumie Tomita, in Tokyo, contributed reporting for this article.

3021 words

4 January 2004

The New York Times

Late Edition - Final

1

English

(c) 2004 New York Times Company

IN the climactic battle of "Kill Bill Vol. 1," Quentin Tarantino's bloody revenge flick, O-Ren Ishii, the kimono-clad yakuza chieftess played by Lucy Liu, turns to Uma Thurman's blonde, blue-eyed Bride, and caustically remarks: "Silly Caucasian girl likes to play with samurai swords."

The Bride turns out to be pretty good with her blade, but the sentiment might well be an epigraph for this season of subtitles and samurai.

Through the same sort of Hollywood kismet that produces concurrent movies about deadly asteroids and exploding volcanoes, the theaters are suddenly overrun with images of Japan. Tom Cruise is thundering across the battlefields of Meiji Restoration Japan in "The Last Samurai," in pursuit of the doomed Bushido honor code and the enlightened spirituality of Zen Buddhism. "Lost in Translation," Sofia Coppola's portrait of alienated Americans in Tokyo, is one of the indie hits of the year. Nearly half the action in the first volume of "Kill Bill" (the second appears next month), with its rapturous, over-the-top homage to yakuza, manga and other Japanese genre films, takes place in a surreal movie-land Japan, subtitles and addled accents flying.

It's not just the setting that unites these movies. They are the objects of heated debate, particularly among Asian-Americans and Japanese, about whether Hollywood's current depictions of Japan are racist, naive, well-intentioned, accurate -- or all of the above.

Reservations about "The Last Samurai" started with reviews that castigated the movie for its stale portrayals of Japanese culture, as well as the patronizing narrative of a white man teaching the rapidly modernizing Japanese how to honor their past. Tom Long, of The Detroit News, wrote that " 'The Last Samurai' pretends to honor a culture, but all it's really interested in is cheap sentiment, big fights and, above all, star worship. It is a sham, and further, a shame."

Meanwhile, in an unfortunate incident: a consultant retained by a party planner for the Los Angeles premiere of "The Last Samurai" put out a public call requesting "beautiful Asian women" willing to dress up and "mingle in character . . . to create the ambience of ancient Japan, circa 1870's." The ad was pulled after the consultant received numerous complaints about the treatment of Asian women as attractive set-pieces -- as well as the notion that all Asian women are equivalent. "Hollywood clumps us all together and it does not matter whether we are wearing kimonos or hanboks or saris," Sarah Park wrote in a letter reprinted on www.aamovement.net.

In Japan, the movie opened on Dec. 6, and has since been met with box office enthusiasm and generally favorable reviews. "With his pursuit of realism director Edward Zwick seeks to surmount the misunderstandings and biases made by Westerners in the past," wrote Noriki Ishitobi in the Asahi Shimbun, one of three major daily newspapers in Tokyo, in a translation supplied by Warner Brothers. Tomomi Katsuta, who writes about films for Mainichi Shimbun, another of the newspapers, said in a telephone interview that the movie was a vast improvement over previous American attempts to portray Japan in movies like "Shogun" and "Rising Sun." Those films were humiliating for Japanese audiences, he said: "They didn't understand Japanese culture or the customs of the Japanese." Mr. Zwick, he said, had researched Japanese history, cast well-known Japanese actors and consulted dialogue coaches to make sure he didn't confuse the casual and formal categories of Japanese speech.

Of course, Japanese audiences are relishing the opportunity to re-engage in the time-honored moviegoing tradition of picking out a period drama's false touches: in this case, viewers have complained about anachronistic samurai battle gear, overly talkative warriors and the unlikely scenario of the emperor appearing before a foreigner. "Even with serious pictures like 'Hiroshima Mon Amour,' the reviewers mainly picked out mistakes," said Donald Richie, an American film historian based in Tokyo.

But what seems to grate at Japanese viewers a bit more is the movie's storybook approach to the samurai, who are depicted as unfailingly noble, and as pure as warriors can possibly be. In fact, the samurai myth is now a fairly tarnished one in Japan, in a way that the movie's glory-filled depiction doesn't reflect. And since that myth was originally created by Japanese literature and film, it's odd to see those outdated images return in new American packaging. "Our image of samurai are that they were more corrupt," said Mr. Katsuta. As for the character of Katsumoto, the philosophical samurai leader played by Ken Watanabe, Mr. Katsuta said, in a phone interview, "It set my teeth on edge."

Mr. Zwick acknowledged that the movie inevitably simplified Japanese history, in order to make it accessible to a current -- and Western -- audience. "The only thing one can do is hope that with a kind of immersion and some respectful understanding, that what you come up with is a distillation, rather than a cliché," he said. However, he also admitted that the movie is heavily driven by myth and nostalgia. "Movies, finally, can't help but dwell in a kind of iconography," Mr. Zwick said. "The samurai myth is partly a myth. It is central in the way that our own lone frontiersman is a myth and I think they find their expression in all sorts of different ways. In this country, we sell cigarettes with the myth and elect presidents with it. In that country it finds its applications in all kinds of different ways and I'm finding my own use for it in this story as well."

Counterintuitively, Mr. Zwick's lack of native familiarity with Japanese culture might have helped the film's reception in that country. "What if a Japanese contemporary director had made it?" wrote Midori Nakano in *The Sunday Mainichi*, a weekly magazine. "Right away, people would start to question the director's political intention and ideological stance."

In any case, star-studded Hollywood epics tend to play well in Japan. (Even "Pearl Harbor," which was hardly a feel-good account of Japanese-American relations, was the second-highest-grossing foreign film of its year.) According to *Variety*, "The Last Samurai" opened on 536 screens (out of 2,700), taking in \$8.36 million its first weekend, which puts it in the top 10 openings of a foreign film for the year.

"Lost in Translation" will not open in Japan until May -- but already, the debate about the movie's stereotypes and how they will play with Japanese audiences has begun. In off-the-record comments, some executives at film distributors in Japan have wondered how it is likely to be received. "The Last Samurai" with its grand scale, heroic Japanese characters and well-known local actors, is an easier sell, after all, than "Lost in Translation," with its more intimate scale, traveler's-eye perspective, and absence of convincing native characters.

In "The Last Samurai," for example, Tom Cruise's character eventually submits wholeheartedly to his adopted culture. In "Lost in Translation," by contrast, the two main characters bond in part over their befuddlement with Japanese behavior.

In one scene, an aggressive prostitute tumbles into the hotel room of Bob, the washed-up movie actor played by Bill Murray. Hysterically exhorting him to rip her stockings, she manages only to instruct him to "lip them," and hilarity ensues. In another scene, Bob looks completely lost in an appearance on a talk show, as its zany host -- played by Matthew Minami, who really is host of such a show -- cavorts in a Technicolor suit and dyed blond hair.

The film has won Golden Globe nominations and accolades from the New York Film Critics Circle and is widely regarded as an Oscar contender. At the same time, filmgoers are debating whether the story uses -- even depends on -- cultural mockery. "I must say that I was disappointed and very offended after viewing Sofia Coppola's 'Lost in Translation' because it's a racist film that's not only insensitive, a caricature (of) the Japanese culture, but of Asian cultures as a whole," wrote one poster on *Indiewire.com*.

In a discussion on *Gothamist.com*, a New York-based Web log, another poster wrote: "A better screenwriter . . . could have come up with jokes that didn't rely purely on sight gags having to do with bad English jokes and 'I don't get this wacky Japanese culture' bits."

Kazuho Tsuchiya, a 33-year-old Japanese graduate student who has lived in the United States since 1997, said he liked the movie, but was disappointed by some of the film's "diehard stereotypical images." He pointed to the scene in which Bill Murray's character, Bob, enters a full elevator and towers over all the Japanese occupants. Jokes about short Japanese men, he said, are a cheap laugh. Another poster on *Gothamist.com*, who said he had lived in Japan for many years, said he found the scene between Bob and the prostitute gratuitous. "A real call girl in Tokyo at a hotel like that for a star like him would have been top shelf and probably spoken passable English," he wrote. "It wasn't realistic, which wouldn't bug me if it served some purpose in the flick but all it really did was play into some stereotypes."

Some American viewers have simply criticized the movie for failing to develop its Japanese characters. "It is not the negative representation of the Japanese, but rather, the shirking of responsibility to depict them as full human beings, either negative or positive, which constitutes discrimination, or racism," wrote E. Koohan Paik on *modelminority.com*, a Web site that bills itself as "A Guide to Asian-American Empowerment."

Ross Katz, a producer with Ms. Coppola of "Lost in Translation," said in an interview that he believed "Sofia's love of Japan and love of the people that she's met there is incredibly evident in the film." He added that the first major financier of the movie was a Japanese company, Tohokushinsha Film Corp., which is distributing the movie there. "Literally, we recounted experiences that I think all of us had gone through in making the film," said Mr. Katz. "When you land in a place in which you don't speak the language and in which your body is off and jet-lagged and in which you don't know how to get places, there are funny, frustrating, difficult things that happen." None of the scenes, he said, were "any slight to Japanese people."

A poster on *Gothamist.com* agreed: "The film really nails what living in Japan is like for non-Japanese speakers. It's really like that, and I think that charges the film might be racist are very sadly mistaken."

If so, it fits into a long-standing tradition in Hollywood filmmaking -- one that exceeds the particularities of America's view of Japan -- of movies about Americans finding their way in an unfamiliar land. "These are cultural encounter films that could take place in Italy or France, and they have done in other years," says Carol Gluck, professor of Japanese history at Columbia University.

"Is it stereotyped?" she continued. "Sure, but so are all these cultural encounters. France and Italy or Britain are just as stereotyped."

Unlike its contemporaries, "Kill Bill Vol. 1" makes no attempt to convey a "real" Japan. It is a pastiche, a dense layering of hip Japan-inflected references, not an attempt at verisimilitude. As a result, it has largely escaped the debate about whether its Japanese characters are faithful portrayals or cartoon characters. (All the film's characters are cartoon characters, and deliberately so.) But despite its obvious and extreme exaggerations, a few viewers have been troubled by its take on Asian movie conventions. "Liu's 'O-Ren Ishii' also strays into the realm of the stereotyped 'Dragon Lady' of Orientalist myth," wrote one Hong Kong-based blogger.

In Japan, many critics praised "Kill Bill" for its knowing tribute to that country's B-movies. It hasn't achieved the popularity of "The Last Samurai," though, taking in just over \$21 million in 10 weeks. Those who share Mr. Tarantino's enthusiasm for genres like gangster movies or manga seem to love it, while others tend to find it more of a perplexing facsimile. "I think that many Japanese people understand Quentin Tarantino's aims," said Ken Sugawa, who makes promotional trailers for Wowow, a television and film production company in Tokyo. "He wants to describe not real Japan and its culture, but the people and culture in films such as yakuza and B-action movies. However, general Japanese audiences are not interested in what Mr. Tarantino finds interesting."

Perhaps the most sensitive and well-rounded Japanese character can be found in a film far smaller than any of these three, "Japanese Story," which quietly opened in Los Angeles last week and will open in New York on Jan. 16. The Australian movie, which won the Australian Film Institute's best picture award, that country's equivalent of the Academy Award earlier this year, stars Toni Collette as a geologist who falls into an unlikely romance with a Japanese businessman, played by Gotaro Tsunashima, who travels to Australia to escape the obligations of work and family.

Sue Brooks, the Australian director of "Japanese Story," wanted to deal head-on with the clichés she had encountered in previous Western movies about Japan and address Australia's long-standing, World War II-bred hostility toward Japan. "It's sort of like an old sore that needed to be healed," said Ms. Brooks. "Not that we can heal it in one film, but we can give back that little bit."

In one scene, an older Australian man takes the new couple out in a rowboat and muses on the country's relationship to Japan. "In the war, we thought you blokes were coming after us," he says to the character Hiromitsu, who is unlikely to understand all of what the man says. "Now you blokes own the place."

But even Ms. Brooks's movie didn't entirely steer clear of old archetypes: before he is humanized by his love affair with Sandy (Ms. Collette's character), Hiromitsu comes across as a cold, rational businessman -- another stock image from Western depictions of Japan.

Compared to much earlier attempts to portray Japanese characters in Western movies, however, the current crop might seem downright enlightened. During and immediately after World War II, in films like "Back to Bataan," the Japanese were portrayed as "buck-toothed, glasses wearing, cruel, treacherous semi-animalistic characters," said Robert Sklar, a film historian at New York University. After the war, paternalistic paeans like "Sayonara" presented sentimentalized Japanese characters, with the women in particular portrayed as mysterious and compliant, in contrast to their more feisty and independent American counterparts.

Revisionist war films like "Tora, Tora, Tora," released in 1970, said Mr. Sklar, emphasized military bravery on both sides. But in the late 1980's and early 1990's, amid fears of Japan's economic power over the auto and electronics industries, the Japanese presence in American movies came in films like "Gung Ho" and "Rising Sun," which portrayed Japanese executives as cold, dehumanized money-grubbers.

Today, the political and economic dynamic between the two countries is less easily categorized. In the absence of any overriding conflict, the current spate of Japan-obsessed movies may simply represent the increasing popularity of Japanese culture in a rapidly globalizing world. Sushi bars are common in most major Western cities, and anime-inspired video games are rife. Japanese icons from Pokemon to Ichiro Suzuki have become familiar names.

"I think it has something probably to do with the new image that Japan is transporting as trendy and right at the very edge of new technological discoveries," Mr. Richie, the film historian, said in a telephone interview from his home in Tokyo. Mr. Richie, whose latest book, "The Image Factory: Fads and Fashions in Japan," was published in August by Reaktion Books, said that over the past decade Japan has become more familiar to Westerners through the export of its popular culture.

That familiarity can both lessen and reinforce cultural stereotypes. The popularity of anime and Japanese technology, for example, makes "Lost in Translation" seem less exotic and more hip, particularly to the young audiences who embraced the movie. "Its general zaniness is what appeals," said Mr. Richie. "The idea that Japan is a land of ravers where non sequiturs abound is very appealing to a certain level of Americans."

"The Last Samurai," on the other hand, plays to the nostalgia for a more honorable time, as well as the rather simplistic desire to honor other cultures by appearing to adopt them. "It's almost painfully politically correct," said Mr. Richie, echoing other critics who have compared the movie to "Dances With Wolves," Kevin Costner's epic film about a white man who joins a Native American tribe.

But despite the cinematic kimonos, swords and pachinko parlors, the soul of these movies hasn't really shifted eastward. "We're embracing the culture for our own purpose, to understand ourselves," said Jeanine Basinger, chairman of the Film Studies department at Wesleyan University. "We've run out of settings in which to do it and our stories are getting tired and we have to find new clothing."

Photos: THEY'RE DRAGON LADIES -- Lucy Liu and Uma Thurman in "Kill Bill Vol. 1." (Photo by Andrew Cooper/Miramax Films); THEY'RE SHORT -- Bill Murray towering over Japanese men in "Lost in Translation." (Photo by Yoshio Sato/Focus Features); THEY'RE NOBLE WARRIORS -- Koyuki and Ken Watanabe in "The Last Samurai." (Photo by David James/Warner

Brothers)(pg. 1); Toni Collette, as an Australian geologist, and Gotaro Tsunashima, as a Japanese businessman, find love in a new movie, "Japanese Story." (Photo by Samuel Goldwyn Films)(pg. 22)

Document NYTF000020040104e0140002I

© 2006 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.

From a stage super-heated by over-the-top, rock 'n roll cliché lighting, DEVO faced a sea of Asian Gen X'ers in a 100 degree plus Fahrenheit venue in the bowels of Tokyo, Japan. The crowd was swathed in bootlegged energy domes and DEVO T's, mouthing the lyrics to songs we wrote when most of them were loading their diapers with UNI-colored poo. Maybe it was a "Beautiful World" after all! Devo Available In Land of the rising sun. A Japan has a significantly better record in terms of average mathematical attainment than England and Wales. Large sample international comparisons of pupils' attainments since the 1960s have established that not only did Japanese pupils at age 13 have better scores of average attainment, but there was also a larger proportion of 'low' attainers in England, where, incidentally, the variation in attainment scores was much greater. The percentage of Gross National Product spent on education is reasonably similar in the two countries, so how is this higher