



Almost everyone has been the victim of a stereotype at one point or another. As for me, I think a little part of me died each time somebody would walk up to me and ask if I knew kung fu.

I felt the same way when people would warn me not to play lacrosse as I was entering Duke. Thanks to popular cultural views molded by the media and Hollywood, some people could be astonishingly narrow-minded.

Apparently this sort of phenomenon constitutes an entire field of study. In Dr. Rebecca Walsh's course "Rewriting Orientalisms," I learned about Edward Said and his "Orientalists." Said found that 19th century Western scholars often studied the "Orient" with preconceived notions of what it was—in this case, Europe's subjugated territory—and this bias resulted in depictions of "Orientals" as weak, illogical, and inferior. I have to admit, I was skeptical at first of "literary analysis," but gradually I started making connections I never would have thought of before.

When it came time for us to choose our own "text" to analyze, I decided on the film *The Last Samurai*. While I thoroughly enjoyed the film, I found it suspicious—along with everyone from my history teacher to Paul Mooney—that the "last samurai" was white.

I figured the film would be a gold mine for themes of Western superiority. At least, that's how it started.

Themes of Western Superiority in *The Last Samurai*

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Professor Rebecca Walsh

In Edward Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2003), an American finds himself thrust into the strange world of the samurai and ends up falling in love with their ways. Captain Nathan Algren, played by Tom Cruise, comes to learn the way of the warrior and join the samurai in their fight against Westernization. While Zwick had intended for the film to pay homage to another culture, some interpreted it differently. David Denby noted the "cultural vanity implicit in the idea of a white guy's becoming a superb Eastern warrior." Sean Tierney wrote an entire paper delineating four "themes of whiteness" (1) and superiority laced throughout the film. Several invoked the term "Orientalism," a concept Columbia professor Edward Said introduced almost 30 years ago in his monumental book of the same name. Orientalism, according to Said, was a systematic underlying prejudice inherent in portrayals of Eastern societies by the West. He found that Western scholars studying the East during the height of European imperialism tended to depict "Orientals" as their inferiors—a direct result, he argued, originating from the position of Europe as the colonizer (and thus the superior) of the colonized Orient. Critics claimed *The Last Samurai* was just another example of modern-day Orientalism, consistent with Hollywood's tendencies to inaccurately portray other cultures.

How can we understand the underlying themes in *The Last Samurai*? Applying Said's theory of Orientalism to the film seems promising, considering *The Last Samurai* encompasses two major East-meets-West dynamics: the interactions between the U.S. and Meiji Japan, and the relationship between Captain Algren and the Japanese. However, such an analysis runs into two obstacles. First, Said's theory hinges on the fact that Europe had colonized much of the East, and it suggests this geopolitical domination brought about the Western bias against the Orient. Since imperialism no longer describes the current state of the world, Orientalism may no longer apply. Second, it misses a couple aspects of the film that are distinctly anti-imperialist. *The Last Samurai*, I argue, presents itself as a narrative of anti-conquest while simultaneously exhibiting Said's kind of Orientalism, portraying an America grappling with ideas of its own power while denying any imperial motives.

The film follows the story of Captain Nathan Algren, a Civil War veteran with a troubled past, tormented by his participation in a massacre of Native Americans.

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Zwick introduces him as an alcoholic and almost a lunatic, as he takes a gun and begins firing toward the audience during a rifle show. As the audience screams and ducks for cover, one man remains standing, appearing impressed. He convinces the captain to take a position offered by Omura, an official from Japan, to whip its newly formed army into fighting shape. A handful of samurai led by a man named Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe) had been rebelling against the modernizing Meiji government, and Omura wanted Captain Algren for his previous experience in putting down “rebels.” Algren reluctantly agrees, and sets off on a journey that will change his life. Soon after he arrives in Japan, the samurai strike at a railroad, forcing him to lead his unprepared army of Japanese peasants into battle prematurely. The samurai overtake the soldiers with ease, and capture Algren.

This is where the plot really begins. It is the travel narrative of Algren, the American foreigner, coming to terms with the “Otherness” of Japan. When Algren first explores the village he is held captive in, a series of shot/reverse-shots establish him as the outsider looking in on a strange new culture. While Algren does view the samurai as an unusual people in that they are different, he never looks down on them. He holds instead a deep sense of respect for the samurai. “They are an intriguing people. From the moment they wake, they devote themselves to the perfection of whatever they pursue. I have never seen such discipline.” Algren eventually comes to love the samurai culture and adopts it as his own. Through the discipline of the samurai, he conquers his alcoholism and learns to find tranquility. He quickly masters the way of the warrior and the sword, befriends Katsumoto, and joins him in the fight against the Meiji government and Westernization.

The way the American Algren comes to terms with Japan with respect reflects the idea that Zwick and the West have a similar respect and understanding for other cultures. In fact, the film was intended to pay “homage to the samurai code of honor and discipline” (Lally).

Zwick’s extreme valorization of the samurai almost conceals the dominating themes of Orientalism laced throughout *The Last Samurai*. Almost. Thomas Keirstead has criticized the way it depicts the “moment of change from the antique to the modern... Here that moment is understood to mean the passing of the samurai and their way of life founded on honor, compassion, loyalty, and sacrifice. The modern world is, by contrast, inhabited by feckless politicians and grasping businessmen who are willing to sell Japan’s soul in return for a quick profit” (496). He also notes how the film suggests “real” Japan was a feudal and agrarian society by portraying the samurai as backwards, when in fact they were a fairly modern and urban class. By creating the impression that the West brought into “rural” Japan anything and everything modern, Zwick suggests that modernity itself was a foreign import. Another scholar, Sean M. Tierney (1), argues the film expresses the idea of the “supraethnic viability of whiteness.” Algren learns the techniques of the samurai with ease; in six months, he is able to force a draw in sword match with his teacher Ujio, a Japanese man who had spent his whole life mastering the skill. Algren even manages to kill off four armed Japanese soldiers—bare-handed. Themes of Western superiority certainly exist beneath a veil of cultural appreciation.¹

These elements of Western superiority find additional support in the film. The only Japanese that Zwick portrays as valiant and honorable also happen to die by the end of the movie. The samurai, with the exception of their newest member Algren, are all inevitably slaughtered at the hands of the Meiji Imperial Army in one final battle. While the samurai are constantly honored throughout the film, all of the modern Japanese are depicted as cowardly, stupid, and evil.² Omura, the mastermind behind the modernization of Japan and the suppression of the samurai, is vilified to the full extent as a cowardly, sneaky sell-out interested only in personal gain. Imperial soldiers gang up on Katsumoto’s son and force him to

¹ Although this is not a focal point of this essay, this interesting dynamic has been documented by Said in his *Orientalism*, as well as by Richard Minear, a scholar who applied Said’s theory to 19th century academic texts on Japan. They found that any respect Western scholars had for “Orientals” was reserved for a time long gone; by contrast, modern “Orientals” were thought to be vastly inferior to their predecessors.

² Another interesting point here is that historically, the samurai were an elite group of obsolete soldiers by the Meiji era. When the government decided to remove the hierarchical system and take away their status symbols and privileges, the disgruntled samurai revolted, bringing about the Satsuma Rebellion (which this film is loosely based on). While it is one thing to honor the samurai, as they are still a part of Japanese history, why Zwick decided to portray people working towards democracy as the villains is a mystery.



cut off his hair, a samurai status symbol. Ninjas sent by the government attack the samurai while they are unarmed enjoying a village play, and to add to their despicability, they try to kill the children as well. In another scene, Algren and Simon Graham, a British translator, convince two dimwitted imperial guards that Algren is the President of the United States to bypass security. *The Last Samurai* may be trying to respect certain Japanese, but it portrays even more of them in a negative light.

Because themes of Orientalism suggesting Western superiority abound in *The Last Samurai*, we may be tempted to merely apply Said's lens to the film and conclude by labeling it as an example of cultural vanity. Indeed, this is what the critiques of the film using Said do, which nonetheless leads to fascinating analyses. However, as discussed earlier, limiting ourselves only to this view fails to address certain issues. The Age of Imperialism is long gone, rendering Said's definition of Orientalism less apt to the purpose of analyzing this film. An Orientalist reading of the film also misses two important anti-imperialist aspects: the focus on Algren's flashbacks of his (and consequently America's) partaking in the massacre of Native Americans, and the ending scenes of the film, which give an impression of power to the Orient.

Algren's guilt, caused by his participation in the massacre of Native Americans during the Civil War era, can be read as disapproval of U.S. policy concerning "internal imperialism" (Price 88). This criticizes Western domination of other cultures, questioning the traditional idea of imperialism. Stuart Price argues that the use of the flashback to represent guilt portrays male characters, often veteran officers, as "traumatized and also, in some cases, apparently 'conscience-stricken.' They become as a result the 'victims' of war and not the perpetrators of violence" (Price 87). By presenting Algren as tormented by his participation in the massacre, "the audience is provided with a context in which he can be forgiven" (Price 88). Algren's guilt shows us that America now knows and has learned from its mistakes in the past—implying that it would never do that again. In fact, Zwick even states that "the movie acknowledges certainly that there *was* an American imperial impulse" (Lally, emphasis added). "Was" is a crucial keyword, for it implies that there no longer is an imperial impulse, no desire for America to exploit other countries for its own benefit.

Another issue Orientalism cannot adequately address is the film's conclusion. After the dramatic battle scene and the death of Katsumoto, Zwick cuts the

scene to Emperor Meiji's throne. Omura, on behalf of the emperor, is about to formalize a trade agreement with the American ambassador Swanbeck. Just before they conclude, Captain Algren limps in, bearing the sword of the fallen Katsumoto. The emperor, deeply moved, rises from his throne towards Algren. "This is Katsumoto's sword. He would have wanted you to have it. Let the strength of the samurai be with you always," Algren tells the emperor. "Emperor, this man fought against you!" the desperate Omura exclaims. Algren responds, "Your Highness, if you believe me to be your enemy, command me, and I will gladly take my life." Here is the ultimate union of traditional Japan and America. Algren, the American outsider, has fully accepted the samurai mantra, and is willing to die for it. Algren's words spur Emperor Meiji to rise, realize his error, and cancel the treaty. Thanks to the American, the emperor and the nation of Japan learn a valuable lesson: remember and appreciate one's culture.

Analyzing *The Last Samurai* produces some seemingly contrary results. The film certainly houses several aspects of Western superiority, or perhaps more accurately, American superiority, over an Eastern culture that leads one to think back to Said and his Orientalists. However, through the course of the movie, the American comes to appreciate the Japanese to the highest degree, expresses his guilt for his imperialist behavior in the past, and even teaches the Japanese a thing or two about cultural appreciation—making Orientalism, a theory based on imperialism, a less apt lens for analysis. Interestingly enough, in the month before *The Last Samurai* began producing in October of 2002, Saddam Hussein was voicing fierce criticisms of U.S. foreign policy. He accused the U.S. of having ulterior motives: "America wants to destroy Iraq to be able to control the Middle East oil, and consequently control the politics and the petroleum and economic policies of the whole world" (Excerpts). Meanwhile, President Bush was stirring America into action against Iraq, reminding Americans of "our commitment to human dignity." "Liberty for the Iraqi people is a great moral cause," he argued. "We must stand up for our security, and for the permanent rights and the hopes of mankind" (Bush).

Could these events be affecting our current cultural views and mindset toward the "Other"? Today, we live in a post-9/11 era, with America increasingly needing to respond to criticisms of underlying imperial motives. The Iraq War and U.S. interventions in the Middle East in general are still very much salient political issues. The film was created and released during a period of strong support for the Iraq War and U.S. foreign policy decisions, and only after some time had passed did voices of

dissent and critiques of the failure of benevolent hegemony gain ground. Just as we needed time to look back upon and analyze our actions with a more critical gaze, we need time to fully recognize how the political moments shape culture through literature and film. By shifting Said's lens to apply to the present and seeing the new types of "Orientalism" that emerge in other literary, cinematic, and academic works, we may be able to see how our perceptions of other cultures have been limited, and perhaps we may be able to extend our gaze more towards a more sincere appreciation of the "Other."

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