

RE-FRAMING MASCULINITY IN JAPAN: TOM CRUISE, THE LAST SAMURAI AND THE FLUID METANARRATIVES OF HISTORY

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Abstract

*After its release in 2003, *The Last Samurai* became a major success at the Japanese (and international) box-office, simultaneously marking a turning point in the illustration of Japan by Western media, and more specifically, by US-American institutions of mass entertainment, such as Hollywood. *The Last Samurai* has been mostly discussed on the background of the historical realities it depicts (the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the unconditional import of Western artefacts and values, the clash between old and new in Japan by mid-19th century) or from the perspective of the impact it had on the representation of Asian or other non-European cultures by American mainstream mass-media.*

Based on a 15-year empiric-phenomenological fieldwork in the slippery domain of Japanese mass-media, as well as in-depth literature research on new media, masculinity studies and entertainment industry with specific focus on Japan, this paper argues that the character embodied by Tom Cruise – the typical white male from Japanese perspective – displayed an unexpectedly refreshing insight into the prevalent masculinity ideal in Japan, as subliminally suggested by the Japanese characters. On the one hand, it challenges the image of the samurai, both in its historical idealization (stoic warriors and social elite) and in their contemporary adaptation (carriers of Japan's post-war recovery). On the other hand, it questions the values incorporated by classical Japanese masculinity and suggests a credible alternative, with emotional flexibility, human warmth and mental vulnerability as potential core attributes.

Keywords: *The Last Samurai*, Tom Cruise, masculinity, Meiji Restoration, Japan, modernity.

1. Introduction: the challenge of Hollywood's cinematic standards

The year 2003 saw the release of three Japan-themed movies by Hollywood directors: *Lost in Translation*, *Kill Bill: Volume 1*, and *The Last Samurai*. After more than a decade of silence (somehow overlapping with Japan's first "lost decade" after its brutal economic disenchantment at the beginning of the 1990s) since Tom Selleck's comedy *Mr. Baseball* (1992), these three movies bring Japan into the foreground of international cinematic attention, manifold. Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* is a romantic comedy-drama featuring an aging actor (Bill Murray) confronted with an existential crisis and his friendship with a young newly-wed lady

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(Scarlett Johansson) in a Tokyo hotel, on the background of the vivid, ruthlessly volatile atmosphere of the metropolis. *Kill Bill: Volume 1* is a bloody, overwhelmingly aggressive feature, typical for Quentin Tarantino, which places its swirling and fighting characters on the background of Tokyo's mysterious façade – and in direct conflict with the even more mysterious and mythologically loaded Japanese *yakuza*. In contrast to these two productions, which exploit Japan as a dramaturgic pretext for the development of specific characters and storylines, *The Last Samurai* is what might be described as a Western *jidaimono* – a historical play in Japan's past with direct, even though highly fictionalized, references to real-life events and figures. The director Edward Zwick recreates in his epic-dramatic style, so powerfully previously employed in *Glory* (1989) and *Legends of the Fall* (1994), the Japanese world by mid-1870s, nine years after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 which stands, historically speaking, for the beginning of modernity in Japan. While *The Last Samurai* has quickly become a major success at the Japanese box-office after its release on November 20th, 2003, as well as internationally after December 5th, 2003, following its publication in the United States (with a box-office income of approximately \$460 millions, over the production budget of approximately \$140 millions), it simultaneously marked a paradigm shift in the depiction of Japan by Western media, and more specifically, by US-American institutions of mass entertainment, such as Hollywood.

With Tom Cruise in the lead-role of the American captain of British origin, Nathan Algren, an embittered alcoholic tormented by nightmares emerged from his involvement in the military massacre of native American civilians at the Washita River by the 7th Cavalry Regiment during the American-Indian Wars stretching over several centuries, who comes into contact with members of the soon-to-be-dissolved samurai caste, the movie has been widely critically commented, mainly either on the background of the historical realities it portrays (Japan in the post-Meiji Restoration of 1868, the unconditional import of Western artefacts and values, the clash between old and new in Japan by mid-19th century) or from the perspective of the impact it had on the representation of Asian or other non-European cultures by American mainstream mass-media. Particularly the all-encompassing presence of Tom Cruise and of his character, both in its on-screen flaunting and with its off-screen ramifications involving the actor's popularity, has been keenly observed, with analysts pointing out “the irreducible primacy of Hollywood movie stars” (McCarthy, 2003; see Isaac, 2003, Lawrence, 2004) and its at times striking mixture of elements: “racist, naïve, well-intentioned, accurate – or all of the above” (Rich, 2004). However, as to be shown in greater detail further below, I argue that, from Japanese perspective, it is precisely the character embodied by Tom Cruise – the typical white male in Japanese perception – that displayed an unexpectedly refreshing insight into the prevalent masculinity ideal in Japan, as subliminally suggested by the Japanese characters. For once, the direct confrontation between Algren and his Japanese counterparts challenges the image of the samurai, both in its historical idealization (stoic warriors and social elite; see Farris, 1996, Turnbull,

1996, 2004) and in their contemporary adaptation (carriers of Japan's post-war recovery: see Hidaka, 2010, Howes, 2017, Kimmel, 2012). In the course of the movie, this confrontation, which gradually grows respectful and even friendly, questions the values incorporated by classical Japanese masculinity and suggests a credible alternative, with emotional flexibility, human warmth and mental vulnerability as potential core attributes.

To this purpose, I shall proceed in three steps. Firstly, I analytically deconstruct Tom Cruise's cinematic persona as composed in *The Last Samurai*, as a carefully crafted combination of his on-screen personality and charisma and his off-screen reputation. This dialectic combination plays an important role in the dramaturgic logic of the inter-cultural narrative as well as in the audiences' perception and processing of Algren's encounter with and his slow integration into the Japanese order of things, independently whether those audiences regard themselves as insiders or outsiders of the Japanese space. Secondly, I critically observe the clinging to past traditions on their inexorable way to extinction as it dramatically emerges from Tom Cruise's character facing the simple realities of the Japanese village, in the stress-ratio between his obvious "otherness" and his steady transformation. While it has been claimed that Tom Cruise's embodiment of Nathan Algren is just another tale on the intrusive white Western saviour (Goff, 2014, Mitchell, 2003, Ravina, 2010: 97; see Yasar, 2018: 39), the dramatic progression of the movie suggests the opposite: Katsumoto and Omura, among others, might assert that they want to know their "enemy" so that they can deal with the Western powers on the same level, but it is, in fact, the "white intruder" who gets to genuinely know the Japanese way of living and of being, out of curiosity and that ineffable sense of cognitive adventure which might be approximately described as "innovative spirit". Thirdly, I identify the two elements in the plot structure which turn Tom Cruise's symbolic presence – as previously mentioned, a carefully crafted combination of his on- and off-screen persona – into a catalyst for hope and for change: Algren's interaction with Higen, Taka's elder son (the only scene of authentic, heart-warming tenderness in the entire movie) and the finale, in which he is the sole survivor of the climactic battle (again, a "happy-ending" which has been widely criticized as Zwick's tribute to Hollywood clichés and conventional expectations). However, I see the "open finale" (as open as it is allowed to be for a Hollywood production) as a powerful gesture of respect which goes beyond simple admiration for the "other"'s values and choices: it is the recognition of one's own worth, after the implacable confrontation with an "other" so different that nothing makes sense anymore. In the process of reorganizing the past, things receive unexpected levels of significance. As to be explained in the *Conclusion*, I believe that the dominating stature of Tom Cruise conferred deeper meaning to the movie by transcending the on-screen storyline through the off-screen assumptions.

Methodologically, I draw on more than 15 years of empiric-phenomenological fieldwork in the slippery domain of Japanese mass-media as well as in-depth

literature research on new media, masculinity studies and entertainment industry with specific focus on Japan. Informal discussions and interviews with cinema-goers as well as with consumers of products of popular culture, domestic and international, allowed me unexpected insights into the mechanisms of perception and processing of media releases. Taking into account the fact that the Japanese media industry is extremely vivacious and almost painful in its superficiality with a calculated momentary impact on audiences, it is remarkable that *The Last Samurai* left a lasting impression – not least due to the powerful messages intertwined in Tom Cruise’s sweeping, comprehensive presence and performance.

2. “I believe a man does what he can until his destiny is revealed”: an epic journey

As briefly mentioned previously, Tom Cruise’s larger-than-life presence in *The Last Samurai* is a carefully crafted conglomerate consisting mainly of two parts: the character Nathan Algren, a deadbeat alcoholic former soldier who vainly tries to run away from the memories haunting him by employing all sorts of unhealthy, self-destructive coping strategies; and the public persona of Tom Cruise as a hard-working actor, deeply committed to the profound construction “from within” of his roles, extremely disciplined and one of the few actors to execute himself his stunt scenes. Apparently based on real-life historical figures of Jules Brunet (1838-1911), a French army captain who fought alongside Takeaki Enomoto (1836-1908) in the Boshin War (1868-1869), and of the American mercenary, Frederick Townsend Ward (1831-1862), who helped westernize the Chinese army by forming the Ever Victorious Army, Algren comes in direct contact with the Japanese military: his first encounters are with the officials trying to build up the imperial forces meant to strengthen the young nation-state (*kokka*) by emulating Western models, against local rebellions led by reactionary members of the samurai caste opposing Japan’s unconditional import of Western standards and structures, regarded as a threat to its traditions (Gomi, 2000: 142; see Goff, 2014). Bluntly described by one of his (American) employers (Colonel Bagley) as “savages with bows and sparrows”, these traditional warriors soon prove to be far more than that, by swiftly defeating – and thus, throwing down in shame – the unprepared imperial army (see Jaundrill, 2014). Taken captive, Algren wakes up in an isolated village in the mountains, where he has to cope with those around him: the quiet confidence of these calm, proud warriors in their secluded world pushes him to confront himself, in a soft inner journey of self-discovery.

Powerful catalysts in this journey are his “conversations” with Ken Watanabe’s Lord Katsumoto Yoshitsugu, which gradually reveal Algren as a broken man, eaten from inside-out by remorse, resentment and maddening feelings of powerlessness, as in this discussion in English (00:50-00:52):

Katsumoto: Ujio is teaching you the way of the Japanese sword.

Algren: Yes, indeed.

Katsumoto: You fought against your Red Indians?

Algren: Yes.

Katsumoto: Tell me of your part in this war.

Algren: Why?

Katsumoto: I wish to learn.

Algren: Read a book.

Katsumoto: I would rather have a good conversation.

Algren: Why?

Katsumoto: Because ... we are both students of war. So, you were the general of your army?

Algren: No. I was a captain.

Katsumoto: This is a low rank?

Algren: A middle rank.

Katsumoto: And who was your general?

Algren: Don't you have a rebellion to lead?

Katsumoto: People in your country do not like conversation?

Algren: He was a lieutenant colonel. His name was Custer.

Katsumoto: I know this name. He killed many warriors.

Algren: Oh, yes. Many warriors.

Katsumoto: So, he was a good general.

Algren: No. No, he wasn't a good general. He was arrogant and foolhardy. He got massacred because he took a single battalion against 2000 angry Indians.

Katsumoto: Two thousand Indians? How many men for Custer?

Algren: Two hundred and eleven.

Katsumoto: I like this general Custer.

Algren: He was a murderer who fell in love with his own legend. And his troopers died for it.

Katsumoto: I think this is a very good death.

Algren: Maybe you can have one just like it someday.

Katsumoto: If it is in my destiny.

Algren: What do you want from me?

Katsumoto: What do you want for yourself?

Algren: What are you doing? Why are we having these conversations?

What a hell am I doing here?

Katsumoto: In spring, the snow will melt and the passes will open. Until that time, you are here. Good day, captain.

Katsumoto is well educated and speaks fluently English, as many representatives of his class did in that period, with the dominating demeanour expected of a rebel general and driven by a strong desire to get to know what he calls his "enemy". The similitude to "Socratic exchanges" (Ebert, 2003) carried by these "conversations" draws back on the *haiku*-like expression mode of many Japanese intellectuals lasting

until present-day, and their outspoken care to preserve this concise manner of communication in any foreign language they might use. Tom Cruise's embodiment of Algren infuses the character with a genuine sense of curiosity in approaching Katsumoto, whom he perceives somewhere between "host" and "captor". The repeated encounters with the villagers and the "conversations" with Katsumoto ban, ultimately, the painful nightmares; Algren finds solace in the tranquil contemplation of nature and of the simple things. Inspired by Katsumoto's later words that there is "life in very breath", in the masterful composition of Tom Cruise's acting, Algren's character gradually turns from a cynical, explosive young man into a considerate person, who cherishes his innate thirst for knowledge and for peace of mind. Tom Cruise's self-reflexive handling of Algren's character resonates deeply with Japanese audiences, accustomed to draw parallels between on-stage/on-screen roles and off-stage/off-screen lifestyles of the respective actors and actresses: Algren's half-hearted, half-mercenary intrusion in the Japanese world and his subsequent slow transformation into an admirer of Japanese traditions, even if he does not understand them, comes across as a powerful validation, doubled by Tom Cruise's solid persona, balanced, stable, and intense in his disposition. On the backdrop of Tom Cruise's reiterations during a press conference on August 28th, 2003, before the official release "This is the first film I've been so proud of" and the ensuing warm statements on "his fascination with the samurai spirit" (Schilling, 2004; see Bradshaw, 2004) which expressed his huge respect towards Japan and the role he himself had played in the movie, Algren's somehow surreal character gains clear contours, becomes palpable and relatable to audiences: he is not an intruder anymore, but a symbol.

3. "You do not fear death, but sometimes you wish for it": redemptive rites of passage

I would say that the turning point in Algren's evolution – backed by Tom Cruise's majestic construction of the character – from an intruder to a symbol is what brings in Tom Cruise's wider image as an icon of masculinity. In this concern, Katsumoto's character and his composition by Ken Watanabe, himself a powerful presence in the media world and in the consciousness of audiences (Japanese as well as international), plays an important, multi-layered role.

Katsumoto is the "moral centre" of the movie, as Edward Zwick states in the explanatory note accompanying the DVD released on the Japanese market. Algren's character is the dramaturgic main focus heavily supported by Tom Cruise's stardom; however, it is in contrast with Katsumoto that Algren finds his way back to himself, as much as out of the same opposition, Katsumoto's idealization – and with him, the entire idealization process which had started immediately after the samurai class has been dismantled as a direct consequence of the new political order after 1868 – loses its appeal and fascination: between death and life, choose life. It has been repeatedly argued that Lord Katsumoto's character, apparently based on the historical figure of Saigō Takamori (1828-1877) and his ill-fated Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, is largely

exaggerated in comparison to the socio-historical reality of mid-19th century Japan. The members of the samurai class had not been the soft-spoken, mild-mannered intellectuals committed to such superior values as loyalty, honour, compassion, but often corrupt, lazy aggressors living off the farmers' hard-work, poverty, crushing taxes; they did not join the new order and economic-political organization of the country out of sudden decency, idealism or enthusiasm for modern values, but out of sheer pragmatism, as most of them clearly understood that clinging on to the past would only mean their own demise, financial ruin, misery. Furthermore, only approximately 6% of the former samurai participated in the various riots (Benesch, 2014: 32-37, Schwentker, 2003: 112), as most of the members of this social stratum were ready and self-confident enough to face and solve the responsibilities and challenges brought about by modernity.

Notwithstanding his wry sense of humour, "soulfulness, wit and power", as Edward Zwick describes Watanabe's enactment, Katsumoto is fully aware of the futility of his own position. He does not allow Taka, his younger sister, to kill herself after her husband had been slain by Algren, a widow who is in Japanese parlance a *mibōjin*, in literal translation "the human who has not yet died"; he does not fanatically believe in a future of Japan in the untouched spirit of the past; he does not incite his followers to desperate acts; instead, he reflects quietly on life, history and humans, and accepts his destiny, as revealed in this dialogue with Algren, in English language, in which suicide and the hopeless continuation of the rebellion to be pursued in the climactic battle are pondered (1:40:05-1:41:02). The "otherworldly feel of this moment when both are going inside Katsumoto thinking about his fate" (Zwick) results from an unusually proactive cooperation between actors on the acting site and the staff behind the camera:

Katsumoto: The emperor could not hear my words. His army will come. It is the end. For 900 years, my ancestors have protected our people. Now, I have failed them.

Algren: So, you will take your own life, in shame? Shame for a life of service? Discipline? Compassion?

Katsumoto: The way of the samurai is not necessary anymore.

Algren: Necessary? What could be more necessary?

Katsumoto: I will die by the sword. My own ... or my enemy's.

Algren: Then let it be your enemy's. Together, we will make the emperor hear you.

Similarly, Taka (acted by Koyuki, with no last name), a far cry from Giacomo Puccini's Cho-cho-san (from the opera *Madame Butterfly*) and James Clavell's, respectively Jerry London's, Lady Mariko Toda (from the novel and the TV miniseries *Shōgun*), is neither curious nor directly interested in Algren, but simply fulfils her duty, assigned by her elder brother, emotionlessly. In the apparent effortless stillness carried by these two siblings, Tom Cruise's character is forced to confront himself, his self-destructive agitation – and to learn to accept himself as

such. One powerful moment is the scene infused with intense sadness in which Taka dresses him in the armour of her husband, where, according to Zwick “[we found] the opportunity to [install] a very different type of love scene that was respectful of the period, of the culture, and of the obstacles between these two people.”, in which “male passivity [is explored] because so often in love scenes it’s ... you know ... quite the opposite”. More importantly, Tom Cruise practices his instilling into Algren’s character of that tremendous internalization of Watanabe’s and Koyuki’s effortless stillness, as he had spent time with them on the shooting location: incipiently, it had started to become visible in the previous scene of the discussion with Ōmura in his office, while he gradually discovers something greater than himself to live for, initially beyond his grasp (expressed in the wordless performance with clear, vivid eyes – observed earlier in Koyuki’s enactment of Taka), but slowly gaining concreteness and warmth. Or, as Zwick himself puts it: “I think really the movie is working best when there is no need for words. I think the more films I do, the less dialogue I like to have.”

4. “I will miss our conversations”: the indelible legacy of love

In the inter-generational referentiality generated by the interaction between Tom Cruise’s Algren and Sōsuke Ikematsu’s Higen, Tom Cruise’s status as human symbol of an entire era is revealed in layers: despite different values and belief systems, the innocent child and the seasoned soldier bond over the terrible fear of death, over its horrific finality and the impenetrable wall it creates. In the only conversation they have, in very plain Japanese language, this fear serves as linking fibre, and announces the transcendence of death through love, which turns the otherwise conventional ending into a message of faith and hope (1:43:12-1:44:01):

Higen: 父上が戦[イクサ]で死ぬのは、名誉だ、と言ったよ。

Algren: 彼はそう信じていた。

Higen: 戦[イクサ]で死ぬのが怖いよ。

Algren: 自分も。

Higen: でも、たくさん戦[イクサ]をしてきたんだろう。

Algren: いつも怖かった。

Higen: 行かないで。

The official translation goes “by the meaning”, according to a very conscious decision made by Zwick and the Japanese scriptwriter/ translator:

Higen: My father always said it is glorious to die in battle.

Algren: This is what he believed.

Higen: I would be afraid to die in battle.

Algren: So would I.

Higen: But you have been in many battles.

Algren: And I was always afraid.

Higen: I don't want you to go.

However, it is important to note the literal translation, which offers an accurate insight into what Zwick calls the remarkable openness, accessibility and “emotional availability on the side of the Japanese actors”, and creates the subliminal bridge to late-modern audiences, Japanese and non-Japanese:

Higen: Dad used to say that it is an honor to die in battle.

Algren: This is what he believed.

Higen: I am scared to die in battle.

Algren: Myself, as well.

Higen: But you have been in many battle, haven't you?

Algren: I was always scared.

Higen: Don't go! (Please!)

Pointedly, the employment of the rather unnatural *jibun*, which can be translated as “myself” over the obvious alternatives of *watashi*, *boku* or *ore* (the literal versions in Japanese for “I”) indicates the painful awareness of the scriptwriters to avoid the implied neutral distancing, unpermitted familiarity respectively placative virility of these words, and to instead create a warm moment of deep bonding. This *jibun* is the linking element which cracks the insurmountable barriers between Higen's and Algren's worlds in an unique scene of affection between the proud, but frightened heir of a millennial tradition about to go extinct and the renegade soldier: Higen is Algren's first connection between him and those who keep him captive, and he is the one to give him the fundamental clue as to the subsequent choice on the battlefield, in that strong, heartfelt, deeply affectionate embrace, in a world which still frowns upon any open displays of affection, public or private.

This emotional climax precedes the dramaturgic climax, the final battle (the result of 31 days of intense filming, “trying to maintain safety and urgency in every shot, every gesture”, in Zwick's words), in which Algren survives as the sole participant on the side of the rebellion. Commentators have seen it as a typical happy-ending à la Hollywood. Zwick refers to it as “I always thought of the character of Algren as someone who is condemned to live, whereas Lord Katsumoto could fulfil his destiny and die; a man who might have thought he would die and who now must actually face life.” But I believe that the way Tom Cruise composes Algren's character, his survival, is a celebration of the newly found “life in every breath”, the fundamental lesson he takes with him from his captivity in Nobutada's village. His survival is not

a condemnation, and thus, an obligation, but a choice and a chance. He discovers the miraculous existence of what humans take for granted, which turns into respect and admiration for the unique gift called “life”. This goes back to the *mono no aware* concept of classical Japan (particularly Heian period, 794-1185; see Keene, 1995: 49-53, Sansom, 1931: 257; see Varley, 1977), usually translated as “the pathos of things”: while it is not directly expressed in the movie, at its most basic interpretation *mono no aware* is precisely this, the beauty of things which resides in their very transience, in the human awareness of its own ephemerality and in the ability to enjoy this beauty while it exists. As long as we choose to live – in dignity, in strength, in joy –, there is always a way to move ahead, particularly by paying forward to the next generation. Not incidentally, the only two authentically affectionate, bright scenes in the movie – the one in which Algren teaches the village’s boys baseball, and plays with them on the field on a sunny day, under the brightly blue sky, and the one in which Higen asks Algren not to go in battle (an impossible request, as Algren is well aware of, again subliminally reminiscent of the pre-modern Japanese stress-ratio between *giri* and *ninjō*, between social obligations and individual emotions; see McClain, 2002: 173, Mason and Caiger, 1979: 84-87) – involves children, male children, carriers of hope and of the germs of change: in the slightly competitive playfulness and in a heartfelt embrace, there is authentic bounding, and the powerful teaching that we can find common ways to understand, accept and love each other.

Algren joins Katsumoto and his samurai fellows in battle knowing there is no way they can win or survive, in accordance with his old military credo that men go to war not so much out of idealism, but out of loyalty towards comrades. In Katsumoto’s quiet resolution to die, Algren in Tom Cruise’s conceptualization finds his own resolution to live: whether he indeed returns to the village, or not, is not important; more important is his newly discovered – or possibly, re-discovered – joy of “little things” happening all the time, which add up to the greater things, such as life and death, occurring only once (see Brown, 2010, Hooks, 2004). “The last samurai” – or the last teacher – from mid-1870s Japan sends a symbolical message in the future, with the unpronounced *mono no aware* ideal as an existential reminder to live life plenarily, every single moment. Guided by Katsumoto’s slightly ironic, even softly self-ironic demeanour, Algren overcomes his self-destructiveness and decides to live: the need to belong and the will to live undermine traditionally transmitted structures such as loyalty or sexual desire.

5. Conclusion: towards a fresh paradigm of vulnerable masculinity

Tom Cruise’s presence in *The Last Samurai* – both in Nathan Algren’s character and as the larger-than-life human symbol he stands for – resonates deeply both with Japanese and with non-Japanese audiences. As Edward Zwick puts it, a great part of movie’s success results from “his [Tom Cruise’s] willingness to not be the brilliant white leader showing something, but rather be more of the humiliated people”, as in the rain scene where he is brutally beaten and defeated by Ujio (enacted by Hiroyuki

Sanada) or in the scene where he practices *karate* while wearing for the first time a *hakama* which he had put on by himself – nevertheless receiving a small bow from Higen, who sees him: a symbolical gesture of acceptance, respect and acknowledgment towards assimilation in their secluded community. Then again, it is always Tom Cruise's Algren who moves towards the inhabitants of the village and tries to connect with them, not the other way round, as mostly presented in Western imagination. This attitude induces and stimulates that remarkable openness, accessibility and "emotional availability on the side of the Japanese actors" mentioned earlier, contrary to expectations fuelled by decade-long stereotypes – presumably, a further result of the tight, powerful cooperation with Tom Cruise.

Tom Cruise's presence in *The Last Samurai* as an epic war-drama and his complex construction of Nathan Algren elegantly conducts to the overcoming of three major challenges usually lurking in such productions of highly romanticized, highly fictionalized historical set-ups (see Hughey, 2014, Jansen, 2000). The first challenge is the nostalgic revisionism. Japan's Meiji period is, barely 150 years after its commencement, a half-mythical time, in which the young nation-state patterned upon Western models and its population carried out in record-speed the import and implementation of Western fundamental assets of modernity such as knowledge, technology, and lifestyle. However, with the import of new systems, new rules and regulations emerge and the social order as well as structure is shaken deeply, without a major overhaul of the fundamental values of the previous era. As Zwick says, "the Gatling gun [employed in the final battle] is the ultimate vessel of modern destruction. [...] When they start firing, it is as if it's the end of the 19th century" – and with it, a whole world with its beliefs, creations, longings. In Algren's re-discovered curiosity for life – as he appears in Tom Cruise's humbling enactment – the disintegration of the "old world" is a necessary condition for the emergence of the "new world", and thus, organically integrated in the flux of history.

Related to this, the second challenge is the orientalist temptation, concretized either in idealization/ demonization of "the others" or in contempt towards "the others". In opposition to the character of Colonel Bagley (interpreted by Tony Goldwin), who transcends the cliché of the "regular white villain" by plainly being "a man of his time: a man who truly believes in the superiority of his race, of his obligations, and of the guarantee of his future, genuinely perplexed by Algren's uncertainties and ambivalences" (Zwick), Tom Cruise's Algren is intrigued by the stillness, contemplation, emotionlessness of the villagers, and in time overcomes his reluctance and their reservation. He moves, on- and off-screen, towards his Japanese counterparts, driven by genuine curiosity (on-screen) and his famous work ethics (off-screen). In doing so, he draws narrative bridges between "us" and "them" – indifferently of who is "us" and who is "them" –, which are authentically supported by his acting performance.

Somehow derived from the first two challenges, the third one – the cultural hierarchization – results from the inevitable tendency, when confronting two – or more – cultures by means of mediatic representation, to compare and draw educational lessons, delivered as existential messages to consumers (readerships, audiences). By placing the domineering stardom embodied by Tom Cruise in the position of the trainer-turned-disciple who learns valuable skills and eventually finds a fresh life purpose, Edward Zwick turns the movie into a huge parable on humility and respect. One might have expected yet another “flashy presentation of unsophisticated toy sword-like fighting”, as one reviewer noted in admiration (Yoshinobu Takebe in *Yomiuri Shinbun*). Instead, the mesmerizing breath-taking scenes prove long hours of intense training in the preparation of Algren’s constitution, and Tom Cruise delivers once again a touching, soft, inconspicuous confirmation of his work ethics and professional discipline. The epic battle scenes serve the integration of Tom Cruise on the Japanese background while conferring historical accuracy to his gestures and interactions as well as the contextualization of the message: when in doubt, choose life – a lesson acquired by the Westerner due to the encounter between the two military men. Not incidentally, the last major scene of the movie, a very important one for the Japanese audiences as the emperor finds his own voice in front of those tirelessly working to manipulate him, employs Tom Cruise’s Algren bringing Katsumoto’s sword to Shichinosuke Nakamura’s Emperor Meiji in a gesture which replaces loyalty with respect as the most important value in the man’s codex of honour: Tom Cruise’s white masculinity and its perception as the universal hegemonic masculinity bows in respect to the masculinity ideal embodied by the samurai ideal – a deeply, strongly reinvented ideal in the shadow of its historical dissolution, to be sure, but still a valid ideological structure to be remembered and acknowledged as such.

Tom Cruise with his status as a world-renowned actor humbly enacting a distraught American soldier who finds in early-modern Japan a source of healing in the fresh sense of love and belonging, transforms *The Last Samurai* into a message of hope and faith: the year 2003 was a difficult turning point year for Japan. Not only the economy would not recover after far more than a decade of recession since its unexpected (though predictable) implosion, but vertiginous suicide rates disproportionately high among the male demographics during the roaring 1990s had shaken the society deeply. In the same year, political tensions due to the US pressure to send segments of the “self-defense [military] forces” (*jeitai*) overseas in support of the UN military missions in Iraq had arisen, increasingly dividing a population famously regarded and perceived by itself as a reputed monolith, united by what Inazō Nitobe in his *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* had distinctively stated: “Bushido was, and still is, the animating spirit, the motor force of our country” (Nitobe, 1905 [2002]:171). The public debate, energetically fuelled by mass-media on all levels, ended with the victory of those few vigorously promoting the deployment of Japanese troops to Iraq – which were officially promised on December 9th by then-prime minister Jun’ichirō Koizumi “for reconstruction efforts” – and despite the

overwhelming opposition of a vast majority of the population throughout the nationally negotiated process of reinterpreting the post-war constitution to employ the *jieitai* exclusively for “self-defense”, as the denomination itself asserts. On this background, singular efforts to reverse the wave of hopelessness had arisen, particularly by animation movies released by Studio Ghibli since mid-1990s which bring forth the powerful message “Live!”: after Isao Takahata’s *Ponpoko: Tanuki’s Heisei Final Battle* from 1994, Hayao Miyazaki’s epic blockbuster in animated form *Princess Mononoke* (1997), followed in 2001 by *Spirited Away* (which won the Academy Award for Best Animated Picture in 2003) are focused on encouraging audiences to find the “joy of life” in the “little things” occurring permanently and which are hastily taken for granted. When inadvertently the same lesson is learnt by a self-destructive American soldier in mid-1870 Japan through his incidental encounter with proud samurai warriors who prefer to die rather than join the unstoppable flow of history, and when the “typical white male” who is enacted by one of the leading cinema stars of the world has carefully learnt the Japanese language, accent included, and has painstakingly mastered the arts of sword fighting, in one spectacular, enthralling movie, this message of life as being the most important asset one possesses and could ever possess becomes more than elitist ideology supported by colourful animated shadows: it grows into an existential model, with Tom Cruise as its human archetype.²

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² In recognition and acknowledgment of Tom Cruise’s service, “time, love and devotion” to Japan and because he has made more trips to the country than any other Hollywood star, October 10, 2006 was declared “Tom Cruise Day” in Japan by Japan Memorial Day Association.

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