Speaking in Images: Japan in Hollywood Films

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When for the screenplay and eventual 1985 film *Back to the Future* Robert Zemeckis chose for his "bad guys," whose threat sent Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) careening back into the recent past, a band of bumbling Middle Easterners ("Libyans," screams Christopher Lloyd's Doc Brown), few Americans sat up in surprise or wondered about the choice, and yet well they might have. After all, it was the time of the Reagan administration and the continued Cold War, and the "focus of evil in the modern world," as Reagan termed it,[1] that the U.S. faced in the world remained, as it had for more than thirty years, the Soviet Union. Despite my having grown up in the 50s and 60s with a consciousness of Russian communists as the primary threat, one that I even glimpsed in the unlikely place of my favorite cartoon show, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, in the form of the "bad guy" villains with the Russian names of Boris and Natasha (also bumblers, by the way), I was ready in the mid-eighties, as was a majority of the American public, one would assume both from Zemeckis's choice and from the lack of any general reaction to it, for this casting of a new stereotypical "bad guy" for the popular consciousness. Remember, this was long before the appearance of Al Qaeda or any of the events associated with 9/11, and before even the Libyan bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which did not occur until 1988. Nevertheless, Zemeckis and the American public readily seized upon this band of Middle Easterners as a believable crystallization of their fear of external

threat. Did the choice represent a prescient apprehension of a shift in American consciousness only then beginning to occur, one that saw Middle Easterners and not Eastern Europeans as the most likely threat to the American way of life? The practical reason for Zemeckis's choice, of course, was that the Russians already had their plutonium for their nuclear weapons and, unlike the present day, rogue Russian terrorists were not conceivably likely to appear and would have lacked, therefore, believability for most Americans. Nevertheless, the choice for these throw-away characters (this is their only scene in *Back to the Future*, though the scene is recycled numerous times in this film and its two sequels) does suggest that the present general American fear of Middle Eastern terrorists was already surfacing even as early as twenty years ago.

For the present essay (one that I must admit is no more than exploratory at this time), this episode from a popular film (and one, it should be added, which had no pretensions whatsoever of engaging in social commentary) provides a good example of the way that cultures can demonize or otherwise warp the images of their perceived "others" in ways that seem harmless perhaps in the artworks in which they appear but which point not only to fears and desires possessed in common by a large segment of a culture but also to the way that that culture might use stereotypes in order to allay that fear or satisfy that desire. I am interested in the development over time of American views of its Japanese "other" as represented in Hollywood films, and as with the example from *Back to the Future*, I will make my argument with reference to what in most cases are seemingly "throw-away" elements of the scenes in question, elements injected casually

by the films' creators but whose very casualness points perhaps to fixations of greater importance to the history of Americans' intercultural perceptions of Japan and the Japanese.

The year 2003 was in some respects a banner year for the image of Japan in the American film world. Within the span of a few short months, three major films were released that focused their viewers' consciousness on Japan and its relation to America and Americans. *The Last Samurai*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Kill Bill* all appeared, and each in a different way demonstrated how very far Japan has advanced into American consciousness to a first rank among industrialized nations and a position of equality with America both in technology and in cultural sophistication. And they demonstrated as well that America still had very far to go before it would ever really incorporate Japan as an "other" that it really cared to understand.

Before I go any further with this discussion, I should say that I well understand that my subject matter here, popular American films, should never be understood as attempting to depict any of its "others" in any way but ones that would entertain their audience and keep them coming to the theaters for more – which is to say, they were made to "sell" first and to mirror reality as only a distant second (if that much) intention, or they were to mirror it only in so far as to convince their viewers of some connection, no matter how tenuous, between the story on the screen and those of history. Therefore, it is dangerous to claim for any of the films treated here a meaning greater than the avowed interest in selling itself in the crude popularity contest that is the marketplace. Nevertheless, that a connection indeed exists between these films and the attitudes of their audiences is

equally undeniable, and to follow out these suggestions to their logical ends is not a useless activity. By doing so, in fact, we may well come face to face with prejudices that we thought we had left behind years ago only still to be grappling with them even now as we pretend to an enlightened egalitarianism and internationalist perspective.

Though the first film that I will discuss is the 1939 *Mr. Moto's Last Warning*, it should be noted that Japan made its first entry into the American film consciousness all the way back in the silent film era, and that entry was both as a subject and as a member of the company creating the illusion that is popular film. Both of these elements helped to establish a certain context against which the *Mr. Moto* films should be seen. The active participant in the creation of these early films was the Japanese actor Hayakawa Sessue (1889-1973), who is known now more for his later roles in films of the postwar era like *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, for which he received an Academy Award nomination. Having attracted the notice of the prominent director and producer Thomas Ince (1882-1924), Hayakawa starred or co-starred in many films starting in 1914, and with *The Typhoon* (1914, Reginald Barker, dir.) and *The Cheat* (1915, Cecil B. De Mille, dir.), he garnered the popularity of a top star. Known for his exotic charm and restrained acting style, Hayakawa maintained on screen what one early history of motion pictures terms an "impassive mask" (Bardèche et al., 107) as he characteristically attempts to manipulate white women into his clutches.[2] The image that he projects is that of a suave, exotically handsome man of the world who, despite his obvious culture, remains below the surface always a potent sexual threat to the white women on whom he fixes his attentions.

Stereotypes, however, can cut both positively as well as negatively in their appeal, and in the image of the Japanese female in American films of the silent era, one finds an allure that is every bit as extreme as is the demonization of the Japanese male of the era as represented by Hayakawa. In the case of the feminine model, however, film versions of Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* (a musical adaptation of David Belasco's 1900 one-act play, which was itself an adaptation to the stage of John Luther Long's popular 1898 novel of the same name) provided the stereotypical image, but almost never with anyone of Japanese lineage playing the role. Starting with Mary Pickford's assumption of the title role in a hugely popular 1915 silent movie, the figure of the tragic Japanese heroine with her doomed love has appeared repeatedly in one form or another in American film productions right up until the present day to the extent that one can talk, as a number of scholars have, of a "Madame Butterfly archetype."[3] On its surface, the well-known story of Butterfly and her American lover Pinkerton is one of devoted self-sacrifice on her part despite the obvious neglect and sexual exploitation on his. A one-sided love, theirs is a relationship that has no rational basis but is nevertheless a love of great intensity for the Japanese woman, as she devotes her entire being, an activity that includes the sacrifice of her life itself, to the service of her undeserving lover.

The background, then, leading into the era of the "talkie" as it concerned Japan and the Japanese contained, on the one hand, the sexual appeal and emotional purity of the self-sacrificing and always subservient female as a positive image and, on the other, the deceptively cruel male, whose handsome but largely impassive exterior hides a

cruel heart, as a negative image. Looked at against this background, the popular *Mr. Moto* series of films in the 1930s comes into focus as a text conveying a cultural meaning that would otherwise probably be impossible to understand.

Mr. Moto's Last Warning (1939, Norman Foster, dir.), the film that I will discuss here, was the eighth and last of the *Mr. Moto* series of B films made in the late 1930s, all of which starred the Hungarian-born Peter Lorre in the title role, and at the time of this writing is the only one of the group available in commercially produced video or DVD. The *Mr. Moto* movies had their origin in a character from a popular series of novels by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John P. Marquand (1893-1960), which were published starting in the mid-1930s. Though relations between Japan and the United States were growing increasingly tense throughout the decade, a fact that Marquand's novels acknowledged, these movies focused on a Japanese in an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of the Charlie Chan movie character and the series of movies built around him. In a theme and variation-like gesture, the Chinese detective Chan is transformed into a Japanese member of the "International Police," and the two Asians are quite similar in character. Both are cultured, highly intelligent, and models of courtesy and politeness. What Moto possesses that Chan never demonstrates is an ability to speak perfect English (though when in disguise, of which he is a master, we are repeatedly told, he unfailingly speaks a severely broken English) and a master's ability at the martial art of judo, which is called "jiujutsu" in the films. Because of his diminutive size and his lack of aggressiveness, Moto's toughness in physical battle always takes his opponents (not to mention his friends)

by surprise. His is a strength that lies hidden beneath a placid, undemonstrative surface, a mask that he has in common, it might be argued, with typical Hayakawa Sessue character of the silent era.

Above I stated that Hollywood depictions of Asians have almost always involved a sexual element in some way, but at first glance, the *Mr. Moto* films seem to belie that assertion. What could be further from the sexual than this diminutive, eternally placid being called Moto? And yet, as we shall see, that is part of the point when it comes to making sense of the cultural associations of the image that he presents in *Mr. Moto's Last Chance* (and by implication the other *Mr. Moto* films as well).

In this film, the events take place in Port Said at the Mediterranean entrance to the Suez Canal at a time contemporary with the film's making, the later 1930s. At this time of tense relations among the European powers, a plot is afoot here in this strategic powder box to stage a violent incident that will pit the Western European allies of Britain and France against one another, and though the name of the government that is employing these spies is left unnamed (despite its being the key information discovered by the "good guys" at the end), the spies use a Maltese cross as their identifying sign and the suggestion from this and the generic European accent of one of the conspirators is that a European country west of France, perhaps Germany, is behind the plot. Mr. Moto's task, therefore, is to foil this plot and preserve the amicable relations between the Western allies France and England.

Though the time and setting would suggest that the film's creators sought a realistic presentation of contemporary events, in fact the

ridiculousness of much of the plot and the characters leaves no doubt that light entertainment alone was the point. The leader of the conspirators is a man known only as Fabian, a ventriloquist performing in a local Port Said theater, and his band of co-conspirators includes a fez-wearing Middle Easterner who always performs as some kind of servant, a handsome and suave European whose job is to charm various characters into both trusting him and divulging any important information that they might have, and a tall, slender, bearded Englishman named Danforth (played by John Carradine) who is in fact an English double agent. In a key scene that takes place in Fabian's dressing room at the theater, Moto listens in on the conspirators from next door as they discuss their plot to blow up a French warship as it passes into the Suez Canal, an act of war that will then be blamed upon the British. In the course of the conversation, Fabian pulls out a notebook, his "spies' gallery" he calls it, an up-to-date collection of information on the various spies in the employ of the Western Allies, to cross off Moto, whom he thinks he has arranged to have killed. What he doesn't as yet know is that the Japanese man that his agents have murdered was but a double, a colleague of Moto's but not, the viewer has already witnessed, nearly as wily as the man he impersonates.

Fabian's "spies' gallery" provides some very interesting information. For every other entry there is a photo of the spy, including a beardless one for the undercover English agent Danforth, but for Moto, there is none. Is it that Moto is much too wily to allow himself to be photographed, or is it perhaps that all Orientals look the same? That Moto's now dead double didn't look a bit like Peter Lorre's Moto, and

his penchant for using doubles, which Fabian's gallery does note, could indeed suggest just such a stereotypical view at work here. But Fabian's notebook entry tells us more[4]: Moto is very good at disguises as we find out immediately. On Fabian's way out of the dressing room, he thinks he hears a noise next door and there finds Moto disguised in a clown's makeup and costume practicing his juggling. Fabian's notes detail as well Moto's adeptness at magic (hence, the juggling). Fabian and his spy ring are momentarily fooled, however, and allow Moto his escape.

What the scene suggests to its audience is that this Moto can be anyone he wants any time he wants and can make that transition almost instantaneously. He can, we can only assume, because he is not really anybody substantial himself, an impersonal, impassive Japanese male. As he somewhat ironically says to Danforth in a later scene after he has revealed himself, "Do not believe everything you hear about me – I certainly don't!" This man who seems at once both everything and nothing, however, has one disguise which he never affects and never in all his filmography gives any hint of a capability for, that of the sexy lover. Never is he here or anywhere the object of a woman's gaze of sexual longing, which makes him, it is important to note, really the opposite of the Hayakawa Sessue characters of the silent era. And that, it seems to me, is extremely important. Was it necessary in order for a 1930s audience to accept an Asian man, especially a Japanese man, as a movie hero, that he be essentially asexual? I cannot answer that question at this point, but it is an important question that I do not think will go away.

If this is what was happening in relation to Japanese males in

Hollywood movies, what was the development from Mary Pickford's Madame Butterfly? One thing that should be noted is that the famous Butterfly appears again and again in one guise or another. One such recycling that has been largely forgotten in the present day but which involved major box office names at the time is the 1962 film *My Geisha* (Jack Cardiff, dir.), which starred Shirley MacLaine and Yves Montand, both first-rank stars at the time. Here the Butterfly story is a "film-within-a-film" with Montand playing a movie director named Paul Robet who is famous but mainly for directing his superstar wife Lucy Dell's (Shirley MacLaine) tremendously popular comedies. The idea to do a film version of the Butterfly story is for Robet a chance to establish his own independent talent in the minds of movie audiences, and he says that he cannot put it off. He wants to "capture the spirit of Japan while it still exists", before, he says after he gets to Japan and begins auditioning Japanese for the parts, Americanization succeeds in changing all of Japan into a mirror of the U.S. in all its contemporary rock-and-roll glory. Lucy, therefore, is necessarily left out of this project, which she at first accepts, but then secretly jumps back into, feeling her own need to prove to everyone (not the least of whom is her own husband) that she can handle a serious dramatic role just as well as she does comedy. This being a romantic comedy that comes at the end of the 1950s, the film will necessarily see everyone come out happy in the end: Paul will have his independent and very personal triumph, Lucy will prove her dramatic capability, and the two of them will see their love reaffirmed and if anything made stronger than before, though none of this will happen according to anybody's plan. Along the way, however, the characters will just barely avoid total per-

sonal catastrophe, and it is at the moment of their greatest stress that unwittingly they give expression to a certain widely held view of Japanese culture that is interesting for the cultural observer.

Lucy does not intend in the beginning to crash Paul's picture; rather, on a bet with the film's producer she dresses as a geisha at a party in Tokyo for Paul and the film's leading man, Bob (played by Robert Cummings), just to see if she can fool Paul. She succeeds only too well. Almost immediately afterward, Paul announces that he is tired of the endless string of would-be Americans he is seeing at his auditions, that the geisha he met at the party (Lucy, in other words) is the only person for the part of that essence of Japanese womanhood, Butterfly.

The story moves forward through the filming of the majority of the picture with various escapades (none of them remotely close to believability for either Japanese or foreigners who have spent much time in Japan), and all the while Bob, the leading man, who, typical movie star that he is, has already four divorces and the obligations for corresponding alimony payments in his immediate past, has been coming to the decision that Yôko Mori (Lucy's assumed Japanese name) must become his wife, and thinking that he is following Japanese custom, he asks Paul to make the proposal as his official go-between. It is for this reason that Paul approaches Yôko in her dressing room near the end of the shoot, and for the cultural observer, this scene provides important material for the argument I am making in the present essay.

The scene in question comes about two-thirds of the way through the movie, and at a number of moments along the way, the question

has arisen in conversations between Lucy and her in-the-know producer (played by Edward G. Robinson) whether Paul would be faithful to her in this land of the geisha and the subservient servicing (sexual and otherwise) of male whims by its women. Lucy always expresses absolute faith, but now inexplicably finds it necessary nevertheless to test both his faithfulness and her own faith. It is Bob's proposal that provides the impetus for her "temptation of Paul," and she plays out the rope of her temptation using certain Western stereotypes of the geisha, and by extension of all Japanese women, as bait. Embarrassed by the situation, Paul finds it difficult to state his errand directly, so he goes at it indirectly, stating first how much Bob has grown to like Yôko. Yôko (Lucy in disguise) responds with a statement of thanks and a generally applicable statement of return affection. It is here that the scene is then steered in a surprising direction.

In intentionally broken English, Yôko (Lucy) says that because there is "sympathy" (probably a rough equivalent to "simpatico"?) between Bob and her and because he probably would desire to have sex with her, she probably should assent, given that he "has the right." Paul reacts as one would expect a man in a 1950s American movie to react, with shock that she could suggest such a thing. After all, who besides a husband, he as much as says, could have such a right? She answers that anyone that she is beholden to, like her patron for example or his friends, or any man with whom she feels this "sympathy," like Paul, for instance, she goes on to add – which is to say, she as much as offers herself to Paul in this scene. What is amazing about this to me is that there has been nothing in the film until this point that would point in this direction, no flirting between them, no obvious

shows of sexual attraction, nothing. There is absolutely no need for her to make this offer or to lead him in this direction, and yet she does. My question is why.

As one might expect, Paul expresses shock at this overture, and given the moral code in place at this time in the U.S., it is understandable why. America was still a very conservative place in 1961 (when the film was made) and 1962 (when it was released). Sex and sexual relations were subjects of much curiosity but little open comment, and films that did make reference in anything more than an oblique way became controversial and were thought of as daring (Elia Kazan's 1961 film *Splendor in the Grass* is a good example). Such candor in a romantic comedy at this time would have been beyond the realm of possibility, however.[5] The common expectation of Paul's generation was that sex came only after marriage and then only with that marriage partner. And yet here was sex seemingly being offered up as the right of any man who shares this feeling of sympathetic kinship with a woman, no matter who she is or what their respective marital status might be. What this scene presents, in other words, is not the clash of different cultures but rather that of American culture with its own assumptions about the "other." Lucy's version of the Madame Butterfly geisha construes the Japanese woman as offering sex freely as comfort to any man with whom she shares what she mysteriously calls "sympathy." And just as important, it suggests that afterwards there will be no need for feelings of guilt. No guilt, no inhibitions, just uninhibited emotional and sexual honesty. For the American male of 1962, such a Japan would seem like a paradise.

Again, we should consider when this film was made, 1961-62, which

was the time, in other words, just prior to what came to be called the "sexual revolution" in the U. S. The state seemingly offered up to Paul's imagination here was precisely that which would be aspired to by the coming sexual revolution in America, and this film therefore seems to prefigure a desire for just such a change here before that important American social movement had yet begun.

In the end, *My Geisha* backs away from this radical departure from its moral and ethical roots and returns to a familiar conservative moral universe. It is announced by Lucy herself at the film's premiere that "Yôko" has disappeared into a convent. Paul, who had recently become aware of his wife's deception and had begun to think their marriage at an end, is mollified and basks in the renewed love and admiration of both his wife and the wildly cheering audience. Paul, then, has his independent triumph as he desired, but it is thanks to the sacrifice of "his geisha." His Lucy sacrifices her own personal triumph in a dramatic role in order to restore their marriage to the "proper" male-centered order. On the symbolic level, therefore, it can be argued that "Yôko" has committed a kind of suicide in this sacrifice on the part of Lucy, and in the end, Lucy has imitated her Butterfly model not only on the screen but in life: she has sacrificed herself so that her man might live and continue existing at the center of the universe.

The next facet of this composite portrait of American ideas of the Japanese woman comes not from Hollywood but rather from American television and its first miniseries triumph, the 1980 production of James Clavell's bestselling novel, *Shogun*. Seeing this series now in its recent DVD release, I find it hard to believe how very popular the

program was at the time of its first run, but popular it was, as any Japanese teacher at an American university in the years immediately following *Shogun*'s television appearance would know. While teaching the Japanese language at this time at the University of Michigan, I witnessed the large jump in our Japanese enrollment that we teachers in our teachers' meetings jokingly referred to as "the *Shogun* effect." This happened all over the U.S. in fact, and according to Modern Language Association surveys at the time enrollment in Japanese language classes at universities in the U.S. exceeded that in university Chinese classes for the first time ever.[6]

The story centers on an English navigator named John Blackthorne, who arrives on a Japanese shore in the years just prior to the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate as a survivor of a shipwreck. Anjin-san, as he is called by his Japanese captors and keepers, is the male lead in this story, and he comes into constant contact and soon falls in love with Mariko, a Japanese woman who speaks perfect English thanks to the efforts of Portuguese missionary mentors, the only foreigners allowed in among the Japanese people. Why these Portuguese monks would teach this woman English, the language of their home country's sworn enemy, remains unexplained, but logic is not really the point of the plot.

The story of *Shogun* concerns the imagined role of a highly skilled, very intelligent and resourceful foreigner (Blackthorne) in the complex and dangerous machinations that eventually put the Tokugawas into place as the de facto rulers of Japan for the next 260 odd years. Though the characters are loosely based on actual historical figures, their love affair and Blackthorne's instrumental role in the ascension

of the Tokugawas are all pure fiction. They and the Japan that obtains from this novel and television film are the products of an American imagination, and again they can be turned to for evidence only as to the contents of that imagination and the characteristic warping of its image of this "other."

The key scene for my purposes comes roughly halfway through the story and is important in Mariko's schooling of Anjin-san in the different cultural ways and concerns of Japanese culture at the same time as it is pivotal in their developing relationship. At the time of the scene, however, nothing of a romantic nature has passed between the two; they simply both know and feel that they are drawn to one another as well as that both of their fates are bound to the fortunes of the feudal lord Toranaga (the Ieyasu figure played by Mifune Toshirô). The scene itself concerns a bath shared by Mariko and Anjin-san, and by being such it gives in to what can only be termed a stereotypical view of Japanese life by Americans, one that sees Japan as a land where (among other odd customs like beheadings and the like) communal, mixed-sex bathing is common. The idea seems exotic to Americans, but as I can attest from having grown up in the U.S., especially in the 1950s and 60s most Americans (including the author) believed that this custom was a societal norm in Japan. And movie after movie includes some sort of mixed bath scene.[7] It was not until *Shogun*, however, that actual nudity was shown in these scenes, which is all the more surprising since this was a made-for-television film. From the 50s through the early 60s, film censorship assured that nudity would not be included in films, but the 60s sexual revolution combined with the other social events of the era which upset the sta-

tus quo changed all that, giving way in relatively quick fashion to partial nudity in mainstream feature films in the middle part of the decade and then to full nudity in the latter part. Television, however, was never allowed to go so far,[8] but *Shogun* pushed the limits at the time and seemingly won many viewers by doing so. Through the strategic placement of hands, towels, and buckets, discreet camera cutaways, and the camouflaging power of bath water, *Shogun* managed to present a completely naked Shimada Yôko (Mariko) and Richard Chamberlain (Anjin-san) to its television audience.

In the scene itself, the subject of Mariko and Anjin-san's conversation is precisely this nudity. Anjin-san, giving expression to his Western-culture shame of nudity, is initially ashamed and embarrassed, but in contrast, Mariko is not at all, powered as she is by a point of view that derives, she tells him and us, from the Japanese recognition of the naturalness of the human body and the lack of any shame or a feeling that it should be hidden. Mariko's artless innocence (think Marilyn Monroe from *The Seven Year Itch* without either the gushy breathiness or the subway breeze) wins him over, but it is not just that innocence which is decisive. She is able to support her argument with clear, concise explanations not only of her own native culture and its underlying assumptions but also of his, which she seems to know in equal depth and can explain with equal eloquence. As a result, she becomes for Anjin-san, and for *Shogun*'s television viewers, the perfect cross-cultural mediator. It is not only Anjin-san that is convinced by her explanations and her attitude; it is also the case that Anjin-san's shame, an inhibition that he has received from his cultural training in England, is defeated by Mariko's open and

uninhibited nature, presented as the attitude of Japanese culture as a whole and not just this individual. This is a cultural battle, the viewer is led to believe. All that Mariko covers her nude body with is an enigmatically sweet smile, which is repeatedly the focus for a one-shot camera cutaway.

There is a further implication of this scene, one that is made more interesting, and more problematic, by the scene that immediately succeeds it, and that is that to take a bath in this way, male together with female, both unabashedly naked and in close proximity with one another, not only is not something to be ashamed of, it is also not something that is necessarily sexual in its nature. It is not to be understood, in other words, as necessarily leading to a scene of the characters jumping into bed with one another – except that in the scene that follows on that of the bath, Mariko is shown stealing into Anjin-san's bed chamber, stripping in front of his backlit shôji (seen only in silhouette), and then slipping into his futon with him.

So, it wasn't sexual, but it paved the way to sex? Again, despite its veneer of logical exposition, this film's narrative development is anything but logical. Not only is the movement between the two scenes in question here contradictory, it is hardly believable that Mariko, who is married to an important samurai in Toranaga's retinue, would initiate and carry on a sexual relationship with another man, whether foreign or Japanese, no matter how unhappy she might be and especially considering that she is depicted as being a devout Catholic as well. Neither her native Japanese nor her adopted Western religious moral codes would have allowed such a course of action. What does happen in this film, however, is logical only in terms of the Madame Butterfly

archetype: Mariko eventually dies, sacrificing herself so that her Anjin-san might live and return to his native culture, which is exactly where he, and we together with him, return with our self-produced archetypes intact. Mariko's contribution to this archetype, however, is her character's function as a cross-cultural mediator, a facilitator that explains and leads at the same time as she provides the required sexual ministering to male desires. Mariko becomes then the 1980s film version of the ideal Japanese female; on a base provided by the Madame Butterfly archetype, the figure of the cross-cultural guide and mediator has been added, and it is this composite figure that then leads to the next film that I will discuss, *Mr. Baseball*.

As a theme in American movies concerning Japan, the cross-cultural encounter became popular beginning in the mid-1950s as evidenced in such films as *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Sayonara* (1957), and *A Majority of One* (1961). This was the decade, of course, immediately following the end of the American occupation and was a time at which America as a whole was getting to know Japan for the first time in most of their lives as an international friend, not to mention an important link in the defense against the perceived Soviet and Chinese communist menace. The theme seemed to disappear as the U.S. entered the turbulent 60s and especially after the Vietnam War came to dominate American consciousness, only to reappear in the 80s and early 90s as America became uncomfortably aware of Japan's economic equality (and Ezra Vogel in his 1979 bestselling *Japan as Number One* trumpeted it as superiority) in the TV miniseries *Shogun* (1980) and films like *Gung Ho* (1986, Ron Howard, dir.), *Tokyo Pop* (1988, Fran Rubel Kuzui,

dir.), *Black Rain* (1989, Ridley Scott, dir.), *Mr. Baseball* (1992, Fred Schepisi, dir.), *Rising Sun* (1993, Philip Kaufman, dir.), and then most recently *The Last Samurai* (2003, Edward Zwick, dir.). That of these films I choose *Mr. Baseball* to focus on more closely is not because I find it particularly good; rather, it is partly because it is not particularly subtle that it foregrounds some of the issues in this filmic cross-cultural encounter so clearly for the cultural critic and partly as well because it tries to make use of every possible archetypal stereotype in order to sell its story of cultural boundary crossing to the American movie-going public.

Mr. Baseball is a story of an American professional baseball player named Jack Elliot (played by Tom Selleck) being sold by his American team against his will to Japan's Central League Chunichi Dragons. Of course this film was made long before Hideki Nomo, Ichiro Suzuki, and other top Japanese baseball professionals had made the reverse trek across the Pacific to become bona fide stars in the American ranks and thereby increase the general American regard for the Japanese leagues. At this time, the move by Elliot is seen by him as a huge step down and a dent in his professional pride, but he has no choice about the matter if he wants to have a chance to return to the American big leagues. Elliot may be past his prime, but he still believes that he can play; however, because pride is involved, he resists the move and all adjustments it entails at every turn and with typical sarcastic eloquence. Having been a World Series MVP and had a reputation for clutch hitting and playing, Jack believes that he knows as well as anybody how the game is played best, and that baseball being baseball, it must be played the same way anywhere bats,

gloves, and balls are used. What he finds out in the first two-thirds of the film, however, is that he couldn't have been more wrong. What social historians like Robert Whiting have been documenting for many years is the way culture influences the carrying out of what seem like the same or similar activities such as playing the game of baseball, and books like Whiting's *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat* and *You Gotta Have Wa* probably underlie a number of the scenes in *Mr. Baseball* where The American Way is shown rubbing roughly against the Japanese social fabric.

Elliot is the stereotypical American male athlete – cocky, superficially confident, very macho in his tendency to show off his physical prowess, and above all very disrespectful of authority and authority figures, whom he treats one and all with sarcasm and bristling opposition. On the Japanese side, we meet with another cultural stereotype, the Japanese authoritarian in the form of Uchiyama (Takakura Ken), the legendary manager of the Dragons. As a player Uchiyama was a superstar, a feared home run hitter who hit for average as well. He was a leader among leaders, a Nagashima Shigeo type of all-around player, and his pride, therefore, is the equal of Elliot's. He believes that *he* knows best how to succeed on the Japanese baseball diamond. The result, then, is the classic opposition between the defiant individual (therefore, the stereotypical American) and the team-first authoritarian (therefore, the stereotypical Japanese). Both want to win, but something has got to give. We have as well the stereotypical recipe for cross-cultural friction and collision, and the point the film attempts to make is that both men are right and wrong at the same time.

If there is to be a happy end – and the lightness of the treatment

and the nature of many of the jokes suggest that deadly earnestness is not what the filmmaker here sought – both sides will have to compromise. Jack, on the one hand, is childish and churlish and must mature psychologically so that he can learn to take instruction. He must learn to become a team-player, and perhaps most importantly, he must learn the importance of a dedication to discipline. Thanks to the ministrations of his Japanese manager Uchiyama, he eventually does make these major character adjustments. Uchiyama, on the other hand, must learn to relax his authority on occasion so that people under him can realize their full potential, which he eventually does thanks to his encounter with Jack. He must learn that baseball is first and foremost a game and therefore that it has to be fun as well as work if the players under him are going to excel, and again, thanks to Jack, he learns this lesson in the end. He learns as well that only by relaxing his authority and rejoining the team itself as a team member will the players begin to take chances, which they must if they wish to win rather than simply to avoid making great blunders. He learns, thanks to Jack, that one must risk looking ridiculous and encourage the same sort of calculated risk-taking in others if one wishes to attain the greatest triumph. As a result of their mutual lesson-learning and the resultant cooperation, the Dragons knock off their great rival, the Yomiuri Giants, and capture that elusive Central League championship.

What is particularly interesting to me about this film is that a third character, Hiroko (played by Takanashi Aya), is from beginning to end the moving force behind all the action. She is both Uchiyama's daughter and Jack's lover, though her relationship to the manager does not

come out until about halfway through the movie, which, however unrealistic it might be, is the only way that Jack might have carried on a relationship with her, given his initial anathema for Uchiyama. She is the motivating force, and yet upon consideration of the entire film and its full range of character and event, she seems not only unbelievable (for reasons that I will get into below) but also totally unnecessary. After all, the other *gaijin* (foreigner) on the Dragons, a black American nicknamed Hammer who has five years experience on the team, could have facilitated all these cultural lessons and perhaps in ways that would have been somewhat less painful for all the characters involved. Hammer is a skilled player who speaks adequate Japanese, works hard, has made his own adjustments to the Japanese game in ways that have earned the respect of everyone, and yet has managed to remain true to himself and his own desires. That Hammer remains at best a secondary character, however, suggests that Schepisi and his writers were interested in more than just the overcoming of cross-cultural friction.

In a commercial film, the addition of romance to comedy makes a tried and true combination that many audiences in both America and Japan find pleasing. To please both, however, is always difficult if it is to be done with more than just muscle and action. Hiroko is in many ways the politically correct answer to all of Jack Elliot's wishes and needs. She is smart and not only catches all the sarcastic nuances of his statements but can trade ironic barbs with him at will. She is native Japanese but speaks perfect English and understands everything said to her, including the subtext and the cultural nuances. She sees herself as the equal of any man no matter what the situation and

understands as well that men read her somewhat aggressive confidence as forwardness and a sexual come-on, which bothers her not in the least. She seems to take pleasure in disillusioning them on this matter. She has been professionally trained at the Rhode Island School of Design in the U.S. and is a very competent career woman in the man's world that is Japan. It is through her advertising campaigns that she has contact with the team and a certain amount of control over Jack's advertising responsibilities for the team. So what's not to like?

But wait, that is not all. Hiroko is also the model cross-cultural guide and mediator who is able to minister to both Jack's and her father's needs, though in ways that first anger them and evade their macho-challenged understandings. It is she who brings the two together against their will and without either being aware of the plan in advance in the meeting at her grandparents' home. Though initially seeming headed for disaster, this confrontation eventually leads to the first thawing of the ice between them.

Not only is Hiroko the model career woman, she further incorporates the stereotype of the Oriental wise man (person?) who provides a key proverb-like piece of advice to Jack at the moment of his greatest awareness of his own weakness. After a date, they return to Jack's apartment (with Hiroko driving, of course), where Hiroko invites herself up for a nightcap. Once there she tells Jack that she is going to draw a bath for him, which he goes along with only because she recommends it and not with any sexual designs on her. At this point in their relationship, he has admitted that he has trouble relating to women other than as sexual objects but that he really wants to try

with her. He has no idea what she is doing this for, but into the bath he goes, and to his great surprise, in she follows after a few minutes, though initially wrapped from chest to knees in a large bath towel. As she enters the bathroom, the soundtrack gives way to the quintessentially Japanese sounds of a Shakuhachi flute, in other words, a signal that we have now entered the world of the traditional, and she begins to sponge his back and shoulders from outside the tub while urging him to speak of his greatest fears, which he does. He tells her that for the first time in his life he finds he is afraid to miss rather than concentrated simply on finding a pitch to hit, that he is afraid of no longer being the only thing he knows how to be, a baseball player. She ministers to his fear – "You will hit," she intones, making him repeat after her – and when he begins to resist again, she meets him with her modern version of what is implicitly a pearl of Japanese proverbial wisdom: "Accept, welcome, try."

Hiroko is, I can and do argue, a modern Mariko to Jack's Anjin-san. And the pattern holds in the next development in this scene as well. Jack finds that he cannot ignore the fact that they are a man and a woman completely nude in a private place, and since he has promised Hiroko earlier that same day that he is trying hard to change his male chauvinist attitude and actions toward women, he tries voicing that embarrassed discomfort: "Look, Hiroko, I know this is probably a very innocent, very Japanese kind of thing we're doing here, but …" This is as far as he gets because Hiroko then initiates a passionate kiss that leads the two of them into sexual intimacy and eventually marriage. The reality of the modern world and contemporary ideas of sensuality therefore are acknowledged, and again this new area is explored under

Hiroko's lead.

So what's not to like about this modern variation on the Mariko myth? Well, nothing – other than what I take to be the fact that such a woman has probably never existed outside of a male imagination. I also take it (without being able necessarily to prove it) that this very commercial of films sought to sell itself to men for its baseball action, the macho opposition between Jack and Uchiyama, and the incorporation of the Mariko clone, and that it sought to sell itself to women with its foregrounding of the "new woman," liberated part of Hiroko's character.

I argued earlier that *Shogun*'s Mariko was a latter day instance of the Madame Butterfly archetype. If that is so, however, does that mean that Hiroko too is but another in the line of Butterfly figures? Certainly at first glance she seems in no way like that earlier Japanese figure of American fiction. In the end Hiroko realizes her every dream. In the final scene, she is shown watching her now psychologically mature man as he mentors the kind of young baseball stud that he once was in the fine art of hitting a baseball in his new role as batting coach for the Detroit Tigers. Having matured, he too now can lead in much the manner that he helped teach Uchiyama. And as Hiroko sits in the stands, she takes a call on her cell phone about a recent advertising campaign she is organizing, and gives a direction about a further fax that she is about to send along. She has her career, her man, her relative freedom, and anything else that the audience might ask of her – except for one thing, I might add, and that is her human believability. The sacrifice that Hiroko makes, if sacrifice indeed is the right word, is not to acknowledge that she too

belongs to one or the other of these cultures that it is insisted she is at home in. She is depicted as able to pass freely back and forth between them without ever becoming caught up in the cultural binds we call "inherited values" that any culture necessarily sets up for its inhabitants. She and Anjin-san's Mariko are indeed sisters, both women sacrificed to the male ideal of a cross-cultural mediator free of any cultural bias other than to serve her man's each and every need.

My real objection to these kinds of characters is that they negate what I take to be a given concerning the human situation, and that is that there is no such thing as objectivity, not even for the very experienced cross-cultural traveler. Culture is not something that one can consciously choose; one is born into one or another culture and it is learned off before one has any choice at all. Each side to a meeting across cultural boundaries always brings something of his/her native culture to the meeting as a sort of bias, and this bias hinders clear seeing or rather, like the lenses of glasses, it refracts and focuses things in a certain way. It is this cultural focusing of images and events that provides the real tension and drama of the cross-cultural encounter. The problem in *Mr. Baseball* is that Hiroko has no bias (and the same can be said of Mariko in *Shogun*); she sees clearly from beginning to end. Men are the problems and have the problems. With Hiroko's tutelage, however, they are able finally to see past (or around) their respective biases, and then able for the first time truly to respect and get along with the other, and further to realize their own individual potential.

So, is there no instance of a mutual respect for both the cultures of the cultural divide and for each individual as well? Is there a case

where the biases, expectations, and characteristic interpretations are shown at work even as the two individuals find some sort of meeting place? I know of very few full films where such success is reached, but certainly there are moments one can point to that do justice to the material being dealt with. One such moment is that near the end of *The Last Samurai* (2003, Edward Zwick, dir.), which is not to say that there are not any problems with the particular perspective taken by the filmmaker there. For one, its revisionist view of the Meiji emperor, for whom Algren (Tom Cruise) in the end offers to lay down his life, is nothing if not historically blind to the nationalist militarist course that that emperor stands for. That part of the film, however, was primarily for American consumption and was no doubt intended more as a nay-saying to the American treatment of the American Indians at the time of the Indian Wars (in which Algren took part and for which his bad conscience drives him to alcoholism and death-seeking) and the thoroughly self-interested manipulation of public policy represented by the character Omura, the advisor to the emperor who originally hires Algren to come and train the Meiji troops. There is much that is hard to believe in the movie and nothing more so than that Algren would be taken in by the family of the samurai he had killed in battle and cared for by his widow, even if she is the sister of Katsumoto (Watanabe Ken), the leader of the samurai band. That the woman and he would grow attracted to each other and that Algren in the end would return to her village presumably to seek her and her children out so as to assume the role of husband and father there are also beyond the logic of believable real-life action, but setting aside these huge objections and simply observing how the growing relationship

between Algren and Taka (played by the actress Koyuki) is developed allow us to see that Zwick and his writers were sensitive to the nature of the problem of cultures being brought into contact by a kiss, that not all people kiss the same way everywhere.

The scene on which I wish to focus comes near the end of the film. It is the morning of the conclusive battle, and Algren is now prepared to join together with his one-time enemy Katsumoto in meeting the government forces, who are much superior in both numbers and armaments. In getting to know Katsumoto, Algren has found in him a man of principled action who is unafraid to die for what he believes in, and Algren comes to love him as a brother and to desire only to go forward with him. His greater experience in Western armaments and battle techniques makes him a valuable addition to Katsumoto's forces for his ability to develop a strategy that gives them a temporary advantage on the battlefield that they can exploit, and this they do. In the end, however, the superior armed might of the government forces rules. The battle ends with Katsumoto dying by his own hand after being shot off his horse and Algren surviving though himself seriously wounded. Prior to the battle as Algren begins his preparations, Taka calls to him from the room where her dead husband's armor is kept and tells Algren that she would be honored if he would wear that armor into battle. She then assists him in his dressing as she would have her own husband. At one moment during the dressing when her face comes near Algren's they both become aware of each other and slowly Algren moves his face close to her for a kiss, which she does not resist. Described this far, the scene does not seem that different from any of thousands of screen kisses, but this one is significant for how it

is carried out by either side and what precedes and succeeds it. Algren kisses like an American and Taka like a Japanese, which is to say that Algren puckers, Taka does not. She does not resist but she also does not immediately give herself over to the kiss either. She allows Algren to touch her lips, to linger there briefly, and then she pulls away, perhaps in shyness, perhaps in memory of her dead husband, perhaps in the knowledge that theirs is a relationship that does not exist in the eyes of her surrounding society and that she is not free to initiate such relationships on her own. The emotion that she feels is equal to his, however, and after pulling away, she slowly continues the dressing, circling around to his back smoothing out wrinkles with her hand, and finally resting her cheek against his back in a sad acknowledgement that he might well be going to his death.

Unlike the typical Western movie, they do not immediately become passionate, just as they did not in a chance encounter of one another the night before as Taka begins to undress in preparation for bed. There they forego an even better chance to realize such passion, thereby violating an audience expectation that *Shogun* and *Mr. Baseball* both most certainly satisfied. What is most satisfying about the kiss from this critic's perspective is that neither character seems to give in or to lose anything as a result of it, and each is completely true to him/herself and his/her culture. Would that all cross-cultural interactions could be similarly conceived and executed.

1. In a speech given in Orlando, Florida, on March 8, 1983, before the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals.
2. I regret to admit that I have not as yet been able to see any of the early films of Hayakawa. They are only now being released in DVD and video

format, and until now have only been available for viewing in the very finest and most complete of film archives such as those at the University of Rochester or UCLA. I rely here on general histories such as that of Maurice Bardèche et al. as well as the two Japanese monographs on the subject of Japan in American film, *Ierô feisu: Horiuddu eiga ni miru Ajiajin no shôzô* [Yellow face: portraits of Asians seen in Hollywood films] by Murakami Yumiko and Masuda Sachiko's *Amerika eiga ni arawareta "Nihon" imêji no hensen* [Changes in images of "Japan" in American films].

3. See, for example, Mari Yoshihara's *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford UP, 2002).
4. It should be noted that at this point in the film, only the absence of the photo for Moto is shown for his entry in Fabian's book. In a later scene, when again the book is opened to Moto's page, the camera scans down the bottom of the page to disclose the information that I list up here.
5. Mention should be made of *The Seven Year Itch* in this regard, where a similar comedy of errors occurs because of a seeming offer of guilt-free sex. There, however, the "offer" was all a matter of male misapprehension and in the end the viewer is presented with a picture of the Marilyn Monroe character that is wholly sensual and wholly innocent at the same time. There is no attempt to present innocence in the offer that Yôko (Lucy) makes here.
6. It should be added that the popularity of *Shogun* was certainly not the only factor in this development. The rise of Japan to the number two position in the world economies and its enhanced position within the American market combined with the rising strength of the yen currency were likely as great or greater factors.
7. Some better known examples are *The Bridges at Toko-ri* (1955), *Sayonara* (1957), the previously mentioned *My Geisha* (1962), and the Bond film set in Japan *You Only Live Twice* (1967).
8. Witness even in the present day the recent controversy in the U.S. stirred up by the showing of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* on broadcast television in the states and the complaints by mainly conservative Christian

groups about the decline of morality this broadcast demonstrated because of its inclusion of full frontal nudity.

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