

Filming *Bushidō*: Religion, History and The Last Samurai

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The Last Samurai is a recent Hollywood production that focuses on Japan's abrupt and violent social and political transformation into a modern nation-state during the early years of the Meiji period (1868 – 1912 CE). The story revolves around Algren, a cavalry captain who is both disillusioned and morally tormented by his role in the decimation of Native populations in the American west. In the early moments of the film, Algren asserts that the First Nations people were the most impressive and just warriors he had seen, and moreover, to him, they were a people whose bravery and fighting spirit far surpassed that of his own ego-driven and debauched commanding officers. Tortured by these revelations, he turns to the bottle for solace and, for his livelihood, to a position teaching military strategy and technique in Japan. In a battle that Algren desperately tries to convince his superior officers is too hasty for the newly conscripted and ill-prepared Japanese Imperial troops, he loses the lion's share of the men under his charge and is captured by Katsumoto, the leader of the renegade Samurai that he was commissioned to dispatch. Taken as a captive to Katsumoto's village, he begins to understand the martial and spiritual code of *bushidō*, the way of the warrior. From Katsumoto's people he gradually and painfully learns *bujutsu*, the physical arts of combat, and *mushin* (no-mind), the practice of acting with certainty and clarity without dwelling in the epiphenomena of existence. Katsumoto recognizes in Algren not only a fierce physical fighting spirit - conveyed through observation and in meditation via the metaphor of a white tiger - but his capacity for *munen*, a mind cleared of dualistic conceptions such as the mundane verses the spiritual or of life and death. Katsumoto's impression derives from his experiences in *zazen* (sitting meditation) and from *busshō*, reflections on the Buddha-nature that is inherent in everything. This mode of Zen thinking is a crucial spiritual component in *bushidō* and one that is well expounded upon in *Hagakure*, a text that codifies the martial code written in the early eighteenth century. To be a Samurai is to continually accept and reflect upon death as a way of life. Indeed, when not engaged in combat, the mindful Samurai should meditate upon his own death, and a recurring theme in the film is the meeting of Algren's nihilistic and atheistic worldview with Katsumoto's devotion to *bushidō* and Zen. While Katsumoto's bravery comes from an 'authentic' and examined faith in an ancient religious creed, Algren's fearlessness stems from a loss of faith in human humility and humaneness. At the end of his winter in captivity, Algren is freed by his new friend Katsumoto. He has grown close to his host Japanese family and new peers, thus he refuses to renew his services in the Japanese Imperial military that threatens them. Algren has arranged to return to the U.S. when he learns that Katsumoto has been imprisoned and will face execution. Algren assists in freeing Katsumoto and sides with the Samurai in an attack against his former retainers. Katsumoto, Algren, and the other Samurai, though greatly outnumbered and out-armed, are driven by their shared faith in *bushidō* as they charge headlong into near certain death in a fantastic final battle scene. As the title suggests,

when the smoke clears, all of the Samurai are wiped out with the exception of Algren and a fatally wounded Katsumoto. After aiding Katsumoto in *seppuku*, an honorable suicide involving the cutting open of one's own intestines on the battlefield, Algren dramatically presents Katsumoto's sword to the young Emperor Meiji while offering the pledge of his life. Overcome by his impotence in controlling the expansionist aims of his subordinates, the teary-eyed Emperor decides that the price of modernization is too dear for Japan if it involves a non-reflexive break with its martial past. In conclusion, the narrator informs us that Algren then disappears, perhaps back to Katsumoto's village and his awaiting love interest, peaceful and absolved from his life of interrupted sleeps and self-loathing.

The Last Samurai contains all of the hallmarks of a successful action film and is worth a watch for these reasons alone. But beyond the attractive actors, the requisite romantic tensions, the stunning cinematography and costuming, the exotic geographic and temporal location, and of course the sensory overload that only well-choreographed battle scenes with swords, cavalry, and cannon fire can deliver, there is much more at work in the film. First, it offers an excellent representation of the link between *bushido* and Zen that, in my view, is unsurpassed in Western cinema. The Last Samurai is also reasonably accurate in its representation of the early Meiji era and the social/political problems both rooted in, and thrust upon, Japan. And finally, it is timely in underscoring a theme in human conflict that is as relevant today as it has ever been.

American movies that appropriate themes from *bushidō* thought are common, although the quality of both film and interpretation varies widely. Starting with one of the better examples, Jim Jarmusch's 1999 film Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai is based on a montage of quotes from the abovementioned *Hagakure*, spiced with Samurai imagery and a hip-hop soundtrack. Although the film is set in urban American and revolves around a modern day self-professed African-American 'Samurai' and his Italian mobster retainer, it remains, perhaps remarkably, a reasonably accurate portrayal of *bushidō* thought and motivations. While for the most part the film underscores the easily communicable Confucian elements of Samurai ethics, such as absolute and unquestioning loyalty to one's superiors, it briefly touches upon *bushō* through the protagonist's meditations on the non-duality of existence and his fearless acceptance of his own death. If one can suspend historical and ethnic disbelief, the result is a clever rendering of Samurai ethics and philosophy. The opposite might be said of a film like Quentin Tarantino's 2003 release Kill Bill: Volume One, sadly, the first installment of a trilogy. Despite liberal references to Samurai, *Yakuza* (Japanese mafia whose self-identity and media image is inextricably wedded to Japanese nationalism and *bushidō*), and a seemingly never-ending barrage of bloody *katana* (Japanese sword) battles, there is little holding the film together, let alone forwarding an understanding of *bujustu* or *bushidō*. Mutant Ninja Turtles are another example, although less offensive aesthetically and intellectually than Tarantino's vision, of borrowing 'the shell' of *bushidō* and Samurai imagery while having little substance underneath, well-honed green bodies and *hundoshi* (samurai-era underpants) aside. One of cinema's best-known green martial gurus to echo *bushidō* philosophy is Master Yoda, who reflects on "The Force" in the Star Wars films. Yoda and his Jedi Knights owe homage to Japanese Zen Master

Dōgen and his twelfth century understanding of *busshō* (derived from Chinese *Ch'an* interpretations of the *Mādhyamaka* school of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism). Heaven and Earth, a 1990 Japanese produced Samurai film, is novel in that it was shot in Alberta, Canada. And while the movie is encumbered by the kitschy charm of a Japanese soap opera, is somewhat historically confused, and one might question the choice of the arid summer landscape of Alberta as a stand-in for a country as lush as Japan, it is infused with liberal doses of Shinto and Buddhist themes paying at least a superficial respect to *bushidō*. Going back a decade, the opposite can be said of the George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola produced Akira Kurasawa film Kagamusha: "The Shadow Warrior." Although the film focuses on authentic figures in Japanese history, namely the mid-sixteenth century power jockeying of Oda Nobunaga, Takeda Shingen, and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, little insight is offered in terms of the spiritual substance of Samurai thinking. While the above is not intended to be an exhaustive list of movies geared towards a Western audience that incorporate *bushidō* themes, it does outline their prevalence in Western popular culture. Of course, the Samurai film genre in Japan is on a par with the western film genre in Hollywood, and many Japanese movies and television series of this ilk are imbued with the same romantic themes of upright, loyal, and honorable men who have been done wrong and now must right those wrongs for the good of all flawed, but blameless, people. Generally speaking, such films harken back to an imaginary golden age of the noble gunslinger or sword swinger, and indeed, comparisons of this sort can be made between the classic Samurai motion picture The Seven Samurai and its shoot-em'-up remake, The Magnificent Seven.

While a handful of films have successfully outlined loyalty, determination, and even fearlessness in facing death as components of *bushidō*, The Last Samurai is a cut above them all in that it strikes at the core of Buddhism, especially Zen, as the religious underpinning of the Samurai code. The Katsumoto character is introduced while deep in Sōtō Zen-style seated meditation. His battle helmet looks suspiciously like the headgear of a Nichiren sect monk; Nichiren is legendary both for his promotion of Buddhism, notably the Lotus Sūtra, as a form of supernatural protection for the nation, and for his numerous and vehement confrontations with the political powers of thirteenth-century Japan. When Katsumoto's helmet is removed, he does not sport a topknot in traditional Samurai style; his head is shaven like a monk's. And, the first among many philosophical conversations with Algren is held in a Tendai temple (both the founders of Rinzai and Sōtō Zen were initially Tendai monks). All of these elements are significant in that they portray Katsumoto as a man of intense Buddhist conviction. Equally clear, initially, is the fact that Algren does not consider himself to be religious or even capable of redemption. Before his arrival in Japan, Algren foreshadows the plot of the film and his encounter with *busshō* thought: "There is some comfort in the emptiness of the sea...[there is]... no past, no future, just a vast oblivion. I am beset by the ironies of my life." The film is rich with ironies, not the least of which is Algren's coming to Japan to aid in its modernization, and failing at this, fighting against modernity armed with a new Zen-based religious faith. Algren's initial Buddhist revelation comes while observing the ceaseless striving for perfection in the village. Everything from the tea ceremony to *kendo* (swordplay) serves to show Algren and the viewer both, the dedication to perfection that underlies *mushin* (no-mind) thinking derived from the Rinzai

Zen meditative praxis. Rinzai holds that *satori* (awakening to Buddha-nature) can happen in an instant, regardless of the action being taken. Thus what may seem to be a merely mundane ceremony or a repetitive action, such as making tea, can be the catalyst for an understanding of the sacred, specifically the non-duality of essence, and stemming from this, the ability to act without hesitation. Algren understands Buddha-nature in a moment of *mushin* during *kendo* practice when the external world seemingly falls away and he fights a previously unvanquished sparing partner to a draw. A second realization of *bushidō* and Buddha-nature comes directly from Katsumoto. In Japan, the cherry blossom is a cultural icon tied to a wide swath of romantic and nostalgic imagery, and the beauty of *hanami* (blossom viewing) season cannot be done justice by my words. The point made here however, is that this beauty, like the blossom itself, is ephemeral, and a common theme in Zen thought is that humans are not different from a blossom. Katsumoto, aware of Algren's nihilistic view of death and destiny, confronts him in a temple garden surrounded by cherry trees. He first draws Algren's attention to the peace and beauty in the garden and then explains how it is the tomb of his ancestors (a transitional place between the living and dead). He reveals that when he is troubled by what he has done or seen in his martial life, he searches for the perfect flower. He looks at Algren and says "...like these blossoms we are all dying. To know life in every breath, in every cup of tea, in every life we take, is the way of the warrior." Algren quietly reiterates, "Life in every breath." "That is *bushido*," Katsumoto affirms. Katsumoto's ultimate realization of *munen* comes at the moment of his death. His last words after a life spent searching for the perfect blossom is simply that "they are all perfect." No duality exists in flowers, in life, in death, everything is the emptiness expounded by Algren in his early reference to the sea; it is all as it should be, Buddha-nature glimpsed in an honorable *bushido* death. Compassion is a central tenet in Mahāyāna Buddhist thought, and until his death, Katsumoto serves his people, saves his enemy physically and spiritually, and in offering unfailing allegiance to the emperor, swallows his public pride, loses his social position, and finally gives his life.

It would be hard to overemphasize the tumult of middle to late nineteenth century Japan and the film succeeds in portraying this period without being overbearingly didactic. Although the seclusion and docility of Japan during the early to mid Tokugawa era (1600 – 1867 CE) is often exaggerated, it is certain that the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 - and the four enormous and heavily-gunned American battleships he came with to 'negotiate' the 'opening' of Japan to trade and treaties with - came as a shock to the conservative and cash-strapped Samurai rulers. Soon the Japanese were signing treaties with numerous Western powers and seldom were these exchanges to Japan's advantage. One example, among many, would be the edict that foreign nationals were not subject to Japanese laws leading to abuses at every level of society. However, the Japanese in the emerging merchant class, not reliant upon agriculture as their only means of affluence, gained from this new international trade and as their pockets bulged, so did their influence. Some Samurai, generally those from regions distant from Tokyo (most notably Kyūshū) took offence to this foreign political and cultural foray and rallied for a return to antiquity and the reinstatement of the Emperor as not merely a figurehead but as the true divine ruler of Japan. The restoration was achieved in 1867, but the fifteen-year-old Meiji and his court were not to revisit the past. The merchant class and

many opportunist Samurai, concerned with Japan's lowly position as an emergent modernizing nation and the overwhelming military might of the West, saw the chance to further or at least maintain their financial and social positions. They dominated public office and changes within Japan came quickly. The openness to or obsession with all things Western, a merchant predilection since the late Tokugawa era, exploded within the new urban sprawl of ports such as Yokohama. Article Four of the new Constitution read, "Evil customs of the past shall be broken off and everything based upon the just laws of nature." (trans. Varley). And towards this end, the establishment of State Shinto and state run schools fostering the science of the day, nationalism, and the drive to 'become civilized,' the persecution of Buddhism as a backward and foreign religion, as well as the newly conscripted army and laws prohibiting the wearing of swords, all came within the first seven years of Meiji's reign. All these changes served to vilify the Samurai and usurp their traditional role as the protectors of the divine nation of Japan. In 1873 the Japanese court refused to answer to a Korean snub, and some of the Samurai, already livid at what they saw as the emasculation of Japan or at least the unwillingness of the government to deal forcefully with foreign threats, broke away and began to rule their fiefdoms (although now their fiefdoms were prefectures under central rule) as they had in the past. This split initiated some small-scale scuffles between the new French-trained conscripted army and rebel Samurai that ended with the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877. In The Last Samurai, the character of Katsumoto is based, albeit with liberties taken, on Saigō Takamori, the leader of this final insurrection against Imperial rule. As seen in the film, Saigō really did help to restore the Emperor, was openly disgruntled with the changes outlined above, was against diplomacy and for expulsion of foreigners, did leave the government and establish a military training camp, was respected as a ferocious warrior and strong leader, did consider himself a defender of Japan, did fight the Japanese Imperial troops greatly outnumbered and without guns, did sustain mortal wounds in the final battle, and he committed suicide assisted by a comrade upon his request. Katsumoto and Saigō are immortal, the former as partly a Hollywood creation and the latter as a statue in Ueno Park in Tokyo. Algren's role is that of the quintessential modern man of the Victorian age; he has lost his faith in religion but is uncertain of what consolation lies ahead in the unfolding project of science and modernity. Similar to Katsumoto and Saigō, it is difficult not to draw a comparison between Algren and the famous Colonel Olcott, American Civil War veteran, champion of Buddhism, and co-founder, in 1875, of the Theosophical Society. The Last Samurai is not a historical documentary, but it does provide a reasonably accurate pop-cultural gaze into the problems facing late nineteenth century Japanese society and, as with any good movie, it also serves as a medium to reflect upon issues of today.

"God is dead" Nietzsche proclaimed, and more than a century later, while his progeny the secularization theorists are in their death throws, clearly religion remains a compelling force of motivation for many in the world. Yet, some still tend to equate religion with tradition or even regression. However religion, like tradition, is always in a process of negotiation with itself and the political, social, and cultural context of the moment. Religion is constantly inventing, reinventing, and reasserting itself, and people consistently turn to it, or look for it, in times of alienation, trouble, and doubt. From the religious and political antagonisms created in the early Meiji period, notably the

fear and competition between Shinto and Buddhist camps as to which could “serve the state” more willingly and to greater lengths, a form of national zealotry was born that would later compel young men to fly their planes like human-guided bombs into ships at sea. Recently, the planes have become larger and the ships have become buildings, but the fear, alienation, and exploitation of religious interpretations as motive have remained. The Last Samurai takes a less than subtle stab at America’s role in colonization and imperialism by means of the imposition of democracy, “free markets,” and the shallow spoils of being modern. At one point in the film Algren is asked by a superior officer, “...just tell me one thing. What is it about your own people you hate so much?” Algren does not answer, creating a particularly poignant silence because the viewer knows the answer. It is the seemingly infatigable and unquestioning drive to make the world like America at any social, cultural, or moral expense. Soon after this scene, a troubled and tired-looking Katsumoto confides to Algren, “For 900 years my ancestors have protected our people. Now I have failed them.” Algren replies “So now you will take your own life in shame...shame for a life of service, discipline, compassion...” “The way of the Samurai is not necessary anymore,” snaps Katsumoto, to which Algren replies “Necessary? What could be more necessary?” At our present moment in history, a time when the political, social, cultural, and religious values of the few are violently forced upon the rest of the globe, perhaps it is unlikely that we have seen the last of the Samurai.

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