

## The Last Samurai (Edward Zwick, 2003)



I've never seen a film which borrows so much from previous films as does *The Last Samurai*. The Irish Sergeant-Major, and the how-to-load-your-single-shot-rifle-under-fire scene, are from Edward Zwick's own *Glory*; pitting a modern Japanese army against a medieval one is from *Kagemusha*; setting the battlefield alight is from *Braveheart*, which borrows it from *Spartacus*; the two samurai betting on who will win is from *Seven Samurai*; coming back to the village at the end is from *The Magnificent Seven*; the look of amazement on the face of the mean samurai, as Cruise rises apparently from the dead yet again, is from the "What the \*\*\*\*?" sequence in *Kentucky Fried Movie*; the Ideal Samurai Village Outside Time looks to me suspiciously like *Hobbiton* (it goes without saying that the movie was shot in New Zealand); dressing native, prancing round in your new costume and then freezing self-consciously as you realise you're being watched is from *Lawrence of Arabia*; being blocked into the valley by the winter snows is from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*; and

the whole dramatic thesis (disillusioned American military type derives new moral sustenance from doomed alien culture) is from *Dances With Wolves*.

Very large sums of money have been placed at the disposal of very careful historically-authentic design. The thing looks terrific. The armour is made especially, and so, I expect, are the Gatling guns which penetrate it. The sight of samurai cavalry charging at you through the misty woods is as terrifying to you as it is to the unfortunate new-model Japanese infantry at whom the cavalry is charging. Terrifying until afterwards, when you wonder, "How practical is it to charge cavalry through a wooded area in poor visibility?"



Having said all this, it's a handsome film, and is, it seems, very highly thought of in Japan, where nostalgia for the way of the samurai has erased all memories of Kurosawa. *The Last Samurai* is conceived as if Kurosawa had never been.

Kurosawa, who came from a samurai family, depicts the average samurai as flea-bitten, dirty, poverty-stricken, lonely, anti-social, anxious to stay alive, and unscrupulous in his disregard of samurai values. No samurai ever commits seppuku in a Kurosawa movie. In *Yojimbo*, Toshiro Mifune – the definitive cinematic samurai – loses his sword, and fights with the sword of a dead samurai, given him by a gravedigger. In *Seven Samurai*, Takashi Shimura (who was also from an ancient samurai family), shaves his head and poses as a monk, thereby voluntarily relinquishing his social status. Such things would be unthinkable to a traditional samurai. They'd rather commit seppuku. None of the samurai in Kurosawa belong to any social group – they are ronin, masterless and rootless: Kurosawa discovered that there's more to be exploited cinematically in their way of life than in the life of a normal samurai, who belongs to a community, and serves a master, while being at the same time murderously conscious of his own social superiority.

*The Last Samurai* will have none of Kurosawa's iconoclasm. Its samurai belong to a community. They're clean ("He smells like the pigs" says the heroine of Cruise, in disgust), honest, dignified, never scratch, live and die by Bushido, and are duty-bound to serve and protect their feudal overlord, who is himself dedicated to serving and protecting the Emperor, even though the Emperor has turned to western ways, and is abandoning the samurai and their historical role in favour of Gatling guns and modern, tricky, nineteenth-century statecraft.

They're also virtuoso disposers of violent death – in this they do resemble the samurai of Kurosawa. The equation of spirituality and mass-killing is one of the most dubious things samurai culture handed down, and leads straight to the Siam railway and the rape of Nanking. "What do you know of the soldier's code? Of Bushido? Nothing! You are unworthy of command!" snarls Sessue Hayakawa at Alec Guinness in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and has him stuffed into an oven. *The Last Samurai* gives you buckets of mass-killing. Cruise is an American army officer, disgusted with the Indian Wars, as Costner is with the Civil War in *Dances With Wolves*. He starts as a drunk, and has nightmares about all the massacres of Native American women and children in which he has participated. But upon coming in touch with samurai ways, he sees that the military life can have its meaning and dignity restored: "No mind! No mind!" advises a young and sympathetic Japanese bystander, in criticism of Cruise's occidental, will-powered, goal-oriented way of fighting. "No mind ...?" mutters Cruise, seeing intuitively the entire message of Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* in a single flash. He learns at once to "trust to his feelings" in a sword-fight, and doesn't need an Obi-Wan, still less a Yoda, to show him The Way.

The gormless facility of it all is part of the movie's charm. Yes, violence is as American as apple-pie: but it's so much more stylish if you add a touch of Zen to it.

