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## **Swords Make the Samurai: The Role of Japanese Filmmaker Kurosawa Akira (1910-1998) in Establishing the Western Notion of a Samurai Film Genre**

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## **Swords Make the Samurai**

*The Role of Japanese Filmmaker Kurosawa Akira (1910-1998) in Establishing  
the Western Notion of a Samurai Film Genre*

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## Introduction

This year, a videogame called *Trek to Yomi* is set to be released by the American videogame publisher Devolver Digital. Produced by Leonard Menchiari and Polish game studio Flying Wild Hog, *Trek to Yomi* is a “cinematic black-and-white samurai epic” (Flying Wild Hog website). According to Flying Wild Hog, the game is meant as a “love letter to all the classic Japanese samurai movies of the years gone by”. Another recent example of a game that was influenced by these samurai films is *Ghost of Tsushima*, developed by the American videogame developer Sucker Punch Productions. *Ghost of Tsushima* was released in 2020 and is described as a an adaptation of “samurai historical fantasy” (Inverse 28-07-2020). In the Director’s Commentary, creative director Nate Fox compares the game to a “Spaghetti Western”, a non-American film about an American genre:

I love Spaghetti Westerns. I feel like they’re a love letter to Westerns as a movie format. And this game we’re making right now [...] it’s a Hamburger Samurai. Where it’s an American studio trying to create a love letter to this genre that we grew up watching movies of and reading about in comic books and are now trying to add to that genre as a homage. (*Ghost of Tsushima* Director’s Cut 2021, Director’s Commentary, 2:27-2:55)

Here too, just like with *Trek to Yomi*, the game is described as a love letter to creative works from the past. Instead of pointing directly to Japanese samurai films, Fox mentions both films and comic books as part of “this genre” that they have been trying to honour with their game. However, with his explanation of their “Hamburger Samurai” being comparable to the Spaghetti Western, it is strongly suggested that films are an important part of this genre. This becomes even more apparent when looking at the in-game ‘Kurosawa Mode’, named after the Japanese filmmaker Kurosawa Akira<sup>1</sup> (1910-1998). Kurosawa is the most widely known Japanese filmmaker outside of Japan and has produced several famous samurai films. *Ghost of Tsushima*’s Kurosawa Mode offers therefore a “cinematic format that mirrors the filmmaker's iconic style” (Entertainment Weekly 08-07-2020).

With his explanation of the Hamburger Samurai, Fox is saying that they, as an American studio, are adding something to a non-American genre. Together with Flying Wild Hog’s mention of “classic Japanese samurai movies”, this appears to imply that the samurai film genre is originally a Japanese genre. However, in Japan, ‘samurai films’ is not an existing genre. Those “classic Japanese samurai movies” would either be categorized as

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese names are written with their family name first.

*jidaigeki* (period drama) or *chambara* (sword fighting), neither of which are an exact equivalent to what a Western audience would see as the samurai film genre. Broadly speaking, the Western image of a samurai film is that of a story set in feudal Japan, featuring samurai fighting with swords. However, the *jidaigeki* genre is a large category for films set in a time before the Meiji Restoration, but are not necessarily about samurai or sword fighting. *Chambara* films on the other hand, as a subgenre of *jidaigeki*, are all about sword fighting, but the swordsmen featured in *chambara* do not have to be samurai. This means that the idea of a Japanese samurai film genre is a Western or Anglophone construct.

In this thesis, I will try to give an answer to the following question: where does the Western notion of a samurai film genre come from and what role did the Japanese filmmaker Kurosawa Akira play in establishing this genre? I will argue that the notion of a samurai film genre is actually an Anglophone construct, consisting of a body of Japanese films from the 1950s-60s. Because these films were produced by Japanese directors for Japanese audiences, the samurai film genre is perceived in the West as a Japanese genre, despite it not being recognized as such in Japan. Within the samurai film genre, Kurosawa has been given the status of its most representative film director and many of his *jidaigeki* films are seen as prime examples of what a samurai film should be. However, contradictory to their representative status, Kurosawa's 'samurai films' often do not follow the cultural conventions that is believed to be the samurai film genre. Yet, it is these films that most people in the West are familiar with. Therefore, the popularity of Kurosawa has made it so that his name became synonymous with the samurai film genre, despite the fact that his films do not always follow the Western cultural conventions about samurai films.

In chapter one, I will look at the historical and cultural context behind Kurosawa's samurai films. To do this, I will first look into the concept of genre itself. Andrew Tudor (1986) and Rick Altman (1999) both explain that genres cannot be defined as clear categories with stable borders. They say that genre exists because of cultural consensus. This means that genre does not have an ahistorical, transnational essence of itself, which is what many people believe genre to be. Instead, its meaning is dependent on historical and cultural context (Tudor 1986, 7). Next, I will look into the historical and cultural context of the Japanese *jidaigeki* genre in which samurai films were made. Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro (2000) explains that Japanese cinema are classified into two mega-genres: *jidaigeki* (period film) and *gendaiigeki* (modern film). This distinction is based on historical periodization, that being the end of feudalism and the rise of capitalism (Yoshimoto 2000, 208-209). Although *jidaigeki* is often translated as period film, the period most *jidaigeki* are set in is the Edo period (early 1600s to

1867). By using Edo Japan as a setting, filmmakers could show sword fighting as their element of spectacle, while at the same time tell a story about the anxieties of a changing society (216). Despite its setting, *jidaigeki* is a modern genre about Japanese modernity (223). Lastly, I will look at how the Kurosawa's samurai films made it to the West and helped form a new genre. Meghan Warner Mettler (2018) explains that in 1951, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* was shown in America as the first Japanese film in fifteen years as part of the diplomacy efforts to strengthen the U.S.-Japan relations during the Cold War. American citizens were encouraged to appreciate diverse forms of Japanese traditional culture in order to change Japan's post-war image of martial fanaticism to that of a peaceful nation. On their side, Japanese Diet members encouraged the export of films that they believed would represent Japan as a sophisticated and artistic nation (Mettler 2018, 414-416). As a result, an orientalist image of Japan was created, which influenced the interpretation of Japanese films. It also means that many people in the West were first introduced to Japanese *jidaigeki* films through the films of Kurosawa.

In chapter two, I will analyse how Western audiences have interpreted *jidaigeki* films and created a samurai film genre. According to Altman (1999), there are two ways through which a genre is usually defined: a checklist and a small corpus of films that are seen as representative of that genre. First of all, I will look at the checklist for defining the samurai film genre. The name 'samurai films' suggests that one can expect samurai to make an appearance, yet this is often not the case. Following *jidaigeki* and *chambara* conventions, the characters are usually a certain type of 'outcast', which includes the often appearing figure of the ronin (ex-samurai). This distinction in status appears to be less meaningful to a Western audience than it would be to a Japanese audience. Seeing the protagonists as samurai also makes it easier for a Western audience to interpret the conflicts in the narrative: samurai trying to live according to their code of honour is easier to understand than outcasts trying to live in a changing Japanese society. More important even than the appearance of samurai is the appearance of a sword, which can make a film instantly a samurai film. This further proves that the Western interpretation of 'samurai' tends more toward 'a man with a sword' than 'position within the upper class level of society'. Lastly, the story should take place in the Sengoku or the Edo period. Despite the setting being an idealized version of the past and the fact that it often functions as an allegory for contemporary issues, Western audiences believe it showcases traditional Japanese culture. After discussing the checklist, I will analyse the small corpus of samurai films. Within this corpus, the most important filmmakers are considered to be Kurosawa Akira, Kobayashi Masaki and Gosha Hideo. With Kobayashi

having produced only two samurai films and Gosha's films being known for their difficulty to obtain, it is Kurosawa that has biggest presence in the genre. When comparing the films of these three filmmakers with the conventions of the checklist, it becomes clear that those films do not follow the checklist faithfully.

In Chapter three, I want to look at the presence of the Western notion of a samurai film genre in popular media. Samurai films, especially the films of Kurosawa, are still a source of inspiration for many content creators. As a case study, I will analyse the way Kurosawa's samurai films have inspired the creation of the videogame *Ghost of Tsushima*. The in-game Kurosawa Mode was made as a format through which players can experience the story of *Ghost of Tsushima* in the filmmaker's 'iconic style', but what the player actually gets in Kurosawa Mode is the look and sound of a film shot in the 1950s-1960s. Also, film techniques that Kurosawa would often use, are difficult to implement in a game like *Ghost of Tsushima* because of its 3D open world with a third-person perspective. Lastly, I will look at the way the creators used and interpreted Kurosawa's films as inspiration for the game.

## Chapter 1: Culture, Context and the Cold War

### *Why Jidaigeki Became Samurai Film*

In this chapter, I will look at the historical and cultural context of Kurosawa Akira's *jidaigeki* films and how these films travelled to the West. First of all, I will briefly discuss the concept of genre by looking at genre theorists Andrew Tudor (1986) and Rick Altman (1999). For this thesis, the most important point Tudor and Altman make about genre is that its meaning is dependent on historical and cultural context. Because genre does not have an ahistorical, transnational essence of itself, it cannot be clearly defined nor can it travel across cultures without changing its meaning. This is why there are many definitions of *jidaigeki*, *chambara* and samurai film that differ somewhat from each other. It also explains why Kurosawa's *jidaigeki* films could not stay *jidaigeki* in the West, because the meaning of *jidaigeki* is lost on Western audiences.

Next, I will talk about this meaning of *jidaigeki*, because it concerns the Japanese context for which Kurosawa's films were made. According to Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro (2000), *jidaigeki* (period film) and *gendai geki* (modern film) are the two mega-genres into which Japanese cinema is divided, with each having multiple subgenres (including *chambara*). The setting used in *jidaigeki* is often Edo Japan, in order to show sword fighting as spectacle, while at the same time tell a story about the anxieties of a changing Japanese society. Therefore, Yoshimoto emphasizes that despite its setting, *jidaigeki* is actually a modern genre about Japanese modernity.

Lastly, I will look at how the Kurosawa's *jidaigeki* films made it to the West and helped form a new genre. Meghan Warner Mettler (2018) explains that in 1951, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* was shown in America as the first Japanese film in fifteen years as part of the diplomacy efforts to strengthen the U.S.-Japan relations during the Cold War. This means that many people in the West were first introduced to Japanese *jidaigeki* films through the films of Kurosawa. At the same time, certain orientalist ideas about Japan were encouraged in order to change Japan's post-war image into a more positive one. This influenced the interpretation of Japanese films and therefore played an important role in establishing the samurai film genre.

### **Genre**

First of all, it is important to look into the existence and usage of genre. People often use and refer to different genres for various purposes. For example, shopowners often sort and display



products like films and books by genre in order to give customers information about the content of these products. It is often thought that this information is something universal, but if you would try to draw the dividing lines between different genres, it becomes clear that genres cannot be defined as clear categories with stable borders. How then should we look at genre?

When people try to define a genre, they usually go looking for that genre's "true essence". However, Rick Altman (1999) explains that genre does not have an essence of itself that can be found or studied. The absence of an essence also means that genres cannot exist as being separate from time (Altman 1999, 218, appendix). How then have people tried to define genres? Usually the definition of a genre is based on two things: a checklist of tropes that often appear within the genre and a small corpus believed to represent the genre best (216-217, appendix). However, creating a checklist and a representative corpus for a genre is a more problematic process than it would seem. According to Andrew Tudor (1986), there's the idea that if a film belongs to a genre, it somehow draws on a tradition of that genre (Tudor 1986, 4). This tradition could then be used for creating the checklist. But for there to be a tradition, you need to have a body of films that make up the genre. For selecting which films are part of the perceived tradition, you need certain principal criteria to base your selection on. These criteria can only be defined by looking at a body of films that make up the genre, bringing us back to the start. Despite these difficulties in reaching a definition, people talk about genres as if their meaning needs no explanation. There is the idea that simply watching a film is enough to know which genre it belongs to (Altman 1999, 216, appendix). Where does this understanding come from? According to Tudor, this instant understanding comes from a certain 'cultural consensus' about genres (Tudor 1986, 5). Tudor explains it as follows:

In other words, the crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating. [...] there is no basis for assuming that a western will be conceived in the same way in every culture. [...] Genre notions---except the special case of arbitrary definition---are not critics' classifications made for special purposes; they are sets of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be. (7)

Tudor, like Altman, argues that genre is not something that exists by itself. It does not have a universal, transnational essence by which it can be defined. Instead, its definition depends on the culture that uses it. In other words, genre definitions are dependent on their cultural context, which includes factors such as the location and the history of a particular culture.

Another important thing to look at is the way genre is used. Altman explains that genre has multiple functions in the economy of cinema. On the side of production, genre serves as a blueprint, providing a formula for making a successful film. On the side of distribution, genre serves as a label that communicates what kind of film something is. Lastly, on the side of consumption, genre serves as a sort of contract between the consumers and the producers. Consumers have certain expectations of a film depending on the genre and they expect them to be met (Altman 1999, 14-15).

However, this explanation of the usage of genre in the economy of cinema doesn't fit neatly on to the usage of the samurai film genre. The main reason is that the body of films that make up the samurai film genre are Japanese films produced for a Japanese audience, meaning that they were produced according to the formulas of the *jidaigeki* genre. When these films travelled to the West, the *jidaigeki* genre didn't, because its meaning is dependent on the Japanese cultural context. This means that distributors had to find or create another genre to use an informative label.

### **Jidaigeki**

The films that are considered to be samurai films are a selection of Japanese *jidaigeki* films from 1950s-60s. As mentioned before, The Japanese genres of *jidaigeki* and *chambara* come closest to the meaning of the samurai film, but they are not an exact equivalent. This is logical if you think about the fact that genre is dependent on the cultural context in which it operates. In order to understand the samurai genre as an anglophone construct, it is important to first understand the *jidaigeki* genre within the context of Japanese culture. It was *jidaigeki* (including *chambara* as one of its subgenres) that was used as a 'blueprint' for samurai films. Therefore, understanding *jidaigeki* and how it differs from the samurai film genre will allow us to see the Western cultural conventions within the samurai film genre.

Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro (2000) explains that Japanese cinema are classified into two mega-genres: *jidaigeki* (period film) and *gendaiigeki* (modern film). It is not a distinction based on dramatic form, but rather on historical periodization. The dividing line is the historical process of the end of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. This distinction contributed to Japan's efforts to transform itself into a nation-state, as it pointed out what should be considered old and outdated in contrast to what was new and modern (Yoshimoto 2000, 208-210).

Although *jidaigeki* is often translated as period film, it is important to keep in mind that it functions as a kind of umbrella term for various subgenres. Also, the period most *jidaigeki*

are set in is a specific period: the Edo period (early 1600s to 1867). The reason for having the Edo period as its usual setting is the complexity of Japanese modernity (215). Although it is often thought that Japan's transformation into a modern nation state started with the Meiji restoration in 1867, Yoshimoto explains that it actually started in the Edo period, saying that "feudal Japan" does not equal "premodern Japan". By using Edo Japan as a setting, filmmakers could show sword fighting as their element of spectacle, while at the same time tell a story about the anxieties of a changing society. Japan's modernization process also gave rise to a strong feeling of nostalgia, which resulted into an "Edo boom" in the late Meiji period. During this time of nostalgia, people imagined an idealized version of the Edo period (216). It is this idealized version of Edo that is the setting for *jidaigeki*.

Thus, *jidaigeki* is not a simple continuation of traditional popular culture, nor is its content necessarily historical accurate. During the 1920s-30s, it used the years between Edo and the Meiji Restoration as an allegorical setting for showcasing the political tensions between left and right activists. The figure of the ronin was often used to represent youth unrestrained by social customs and obligations. Because many *jidaigeki* filmmakers were radical youths themselves, the genre faced government suppression (221-222). Other developments that had a big influence on *jidaigeki* during this period were the rise of popular literature and the emergence of Shinkokugeki (New National Theatre). Shinkokugeki was a new school of theatre that was best known for its realistic style of swordplay in contrast to the traditional stylistic Kabuki swordplay (213). This style of swordplay was appropriated into *jidaigeki* to provide spectacle alongside the narrative, which was a must if one wanted to compete against Hollywood, of which its success was partly because of the ability to combine plot with spectacle (215). In 1920s, The narrative in *jidaigeki* was often inspired by Japanese popular literature, being mostly *chambara* fiction and *jidai shosetsu* (period novel) (214).

Not much later, the genre faced suppression for a second time during the American Occupation after World War II. This was because the American censors believed the films propagated feudal ideals, which was not the case (222-224). Yoshimoto explains it as follows:

[...] *jidaigeki* is, despite its explicit diegetic content, a modern genre, and it does not affirm or reflect feudalistic values straightforwardly as the American censors believed. Not a simple continuation of traditional popular culture, *jidaigeki* has less to do with a revival of tradition than with an emerging society of the masses and various strains of modernization. (223)

As Yoshimoto keeps emphasizing, *jidaigeki* is a modern genre. It was even suppressed by the Meiji government for being useless entertainment and commenting on social problems.

During the post-war period, the issues *jidaigeki* referred to shifted from modernity to the horrors of the war and life during the Occupation (227).

### Going West

It is now clear in what kind of cultural context *jidaigeki* films of the 1950s-1960s were produced. As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, genre serves as a sort of social contract between producers and consumers. It is used as a blueprint for producers to make films that have a high chance of being successful with the consumers. On the side of the consumers, genre gives them certain expectations that they expect to be fulfilled. However, in this case, *jidaigeki* has not served the purpose of a blueprint that fits the Western audiences' expectation, because they were made for Japanese audiences. Also, because the genre is very much tied to Japanese history and political context, it cannot be used to sufficiently inform Western audiences what to expect. Instead, the samurai film genre was conceived by Western audiences based on a selection of *jidaigeki* films that were exported to the West.

First of all, How did Western audiences come into contact with *jidaigeki* films? Meghan Warner Mettler (2018) explains that in 1951, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* was shown in America as the first Japanese film in fifteen years and also the first Japanese film ever to receive nationwide distribution. This was part of the diplomacy efforts to strengthen the U.S.-Japan relations during the Cold War (Mettler 2018, 414-415). After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the United States occupied Japan for seven years. In the beginning, the aim was to demilitarize Japan, but because of the rising threat of communist China and the Soviet Union, the U.S. changed course and wanted to make Japan into a strong ally. As a part of this, cultural exchanges were encouraged to make the public more positive towards strengthening ties with Japan. As a result, cultural institutions in the U.S. encouraged American citizens to appreciate diverse forms of Japanese traditional culture. As opposed to the image of Japanese martial fanaticism, things like bonsai, ikebana and Zen Buddhism were introduced to show a favourable image of Japan that was about reflection and serenity. On their end, Japan encouraged the export of films like *Rashomon* to rehabilitate their post-war image as sophisticated and artistic (415-416). As a result, these films were perceived by the American audiences as an upper-class product of an unique cultural tradition.

Also, the Western appeal of samurai films was the fact that they were very "Japanese". Fukushima Hiroko (2017) states that Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962) were very popular in the West because of their "rich exoticism" (濃厚なエキゾチシズム)

(Fukushima 2017, 99). This does not mean that their appeal was only defined by their Japanese-ness, but rather that critics never failed to mention the Japanese roots when discussing the quality of a Japanese film (Mettler 2018, 427). Mettler explains:

Film critics in this decade in particular had a tendency to treat foreign movies as edifying artifacts. Assuming Hollywood as the standard, they sought to interpret how the national cinema of other countries differed from that norm in their own particular ways, as well as what those differences might reveal about the people who lived in those countries. (420-421)

In other words, Western audiences used Japanese films as a window to look at and understand Japanese culture. The orientalist image of Japan as a serene and traditional nation that was encouraged by the diplomacy efforts between the U.S. and Japan heavily influenced their interpretation of Japanese films. As a result, Western cultural conventions that would eventually create the samurai film genre were thought of as *Japanese* cultural conventions based on *Japanese* cultural tradition.

Another example of treating foreign films as a window into their respective cultures is UNESCO's film catalogue called *Orient. A Survey of Films Produced in Countries of Arab and Asian Culture*, published in 1959. This catalogue of Eastern films that were "suitable" for Western audiences was created with the purpose of familiarizing Western viewers with Eastern cultures. The reason behind this purpose was to provide a certain cultural intervention for the tense situation during the Cold War (Huttunen 2020, 281-282). About the selection of the films, Huttunen says:

The films in the catalogue were selected based on three criteria: (1) they have been shown or received awards at international film festivals, (2) they have enjoyed box-office success and wide distribution in their own country or (3) they are of historical importance in the development of cinema in the country concerned. Suggestions for films were solicited from the representatives of the countries in question, while the National Commissions for UNESCO had the final say. (284)

Again, the films that are selected to travel to the West are those that are being considered to be of high quality. The problem with this selection lies in the fact that the high quality of those films comes partly from UNESCO's interpretation of their content. This interpretation was mostly focused on the cultural differences between East and West, because the purpose of the catalogue was to teach Western audiences about Eastern cultures through film. Therefore, each film entry came with a ready-made interpretation about the film, influencing the interpretation of the audience that had yet to see the film (283, 293).

Consequently, the Western reception of Kurosawa was heavily influenced by the historical context surrounding his introduction to Western audiences. It was his film *Rashomon* that was being shown in the U.S. after a fifteen year absence of Japanese films. This, in combination with the nationwide distribution, meant that for many American viewers, Kurosawa's films were probably the first introduction they got to Japanese cinema. In the case of UNESCO's catalogue, five out of the 139 films in total were directed by Kurosawa, "the biggest number of feature films by a single director in the catalogue" (Huttunen 2020, 284). Three of them were *jidaigeki*: *Rashomon* (1950), *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Throne of Blood* (1957). Especially *Seven Samurai*, which received the same level of exposure as *Rashomon* upon its release (Martin 2017, 26), would have a big influence on the Western notion of a samurai film genre, as we shall see in chapter two.

Although Kurosawa produced many celebrated *gendaigeki* films as well, due to the popularity of his *jidaigeki* films in the West, Kurosawa is often thought of as the master of the samurai genre. Because of the political context of the Cold War and orientalist perspectives of the time, Kurosawa's 'samurai films' were seen as products of high quality that showed traditional Japanese culture. Furthermore, he is often removed from any historical or industrial context and presented as a genius removed from cultural pressures (Russell 2002, 4-6). On the other hand, in Japan, Kurosawa's "Japanese-ness" is often debated, and some even resent him for making films according to "Western tastes", in contrast to directors like Ozu Yasujiro (12). Yet, because his films were the most widely exported outside Japan, he became representative of Japanese national cinema.

## **Conclusion**

Genre does not have a universal, transnational essence by which it can be defined. Instead, the definition of genre depends on its cultural context. Genre has multiple functions in the economy of cinema: a blueprint for production, a label for distribution and on the side of consumption, it serves as a certain social contract between consumers and producers. However, because the samurai film genre consist of a body of Japanese films from the *jidaigeki* genre, this usage of genre cannot be applied.

Japanese cinema are classified into two mega-genres: *jidaigeki* (period film) and *gendaigeki* (modern film). It is not a distinction based on dramatic form, but rather on historical periodization. The dividing line is the historical process of the end of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. The period most *jidaigeki* are set in is the Edo period (early 1600s to 1867). However, the Edo period that is shown is an idealized version instead of an accurate

portrayal. By using Edo Japan as a setting, filmmakers could show sword fighting as their element of spectacle, while at the same time tell a story about the anxieties of a changing society. Thus, the *jidaigeki* genre is not a simple continuation of traditional popular culture, nor is its content necessarily historical accurate.

The creation of the Western notion of a samurai film genre is tied to the period of the Cold War. To create a more positive Western image of Japan, certain Japanese films were shown in Western cinemas as upper-class products of an unique cultural tradition. Furthermore, the orientalist gaze of the audiences influenced the interpretation of Japanese films. As a result, Western cultural conventions that would eventually create the samurai film genre were thought of as *Japanese* cultural conventions based on *Japanese* cultural tradition.

The Western reception of Kurosawa was heavily influenced by the historical context surrounding his introduction to Western audiences. Because the *jidaigeki* genre is dependent on the Japanese cultural context, it could not be used in relation to Western audiences. In this gap, the samurai film genre was created. Because of the political context of the Cold War and orientalist perspectives of the time, Kurosawa's 'samurai films' were seen as products of high quality that showed traditional Japanese culture. Because his films were the most widely exported outside Japan, Kurosawa's name became representative of the Western understanding of Japanese national cinema, including the samurai film genre.

## Chapter 2: Swords Make the Samurai

### *The Notion of a Samurai Film Genre as an Anglophone Construct*

In chapter one, I have looked into the cultural context in which Japanese *jidaigeki* films from the 1950s-60s, with an emphasis on Kurosawa's *jidaigeki* films, were produced. Also, I talked about how some of those *jidaigeki* films were selected for export to the West during the Cold War. The political situation and orientalist perspective of that time influenced Western interpretations of Japanese films. The 'cultural consensus' about these interpretations would form the notion a samurai film genre. However, because the samurai film genre consists of Japanese films, the genre is believed to be a traditional Japanese genre, which is not the case.

In this chapter, I will analyse in more detail how English-speaking audiences have interpreted *jidaigeki* films and created a samurai film genre. I will do this by critically looking at the two ways through which a genre is usually defined, as explained in chapter one: a checklist and a small corpus of films that are seen as representative of that genre. First, I will look at the checklist for defining the samurai film genre. Taking Patrick Galloway's checklist (2005) as example, I will look at the following criteria: the appearance of samurai, the appearance of swords and the setting of the Edo period. Then, I will analyse the small corpus of films that are seen as representative of the samurai film genre. The most important filmmakers of this corpus are Kurosawa Akira, Gosha Hideo and Kobayashi Masaki. Of these three filmmakers, the name of Kurosawa is the most associated with samurai films. By analysing the cultural conventions that make up this genre, it is not Japanese culture that we are studying, but our own.

#### **The Checklist**

According to Altman (1999), there are two ways through which a genre is usually defined: a checklist and a small corpus of films that are seen as representative of that genre. The problem with this method of definition lies in the fact that the checklist and the corpus of films are based on each other instead of separate 'essential characteristics' of a genre, which do not exist. However, looking at the checklist and the film corpus of the samurai film genre does give us a good overview of what Western audiences believe are the essential characteristics of the genre.



For discussing the checklist, I will make use of the one written by Patrick Galloway in his book *Stray Dogs & Lone Wolves : The Samurai Film Handbook* (2005). Galloway's checklist is as follows (Galloway 2005, 11):

1. The film has samurai in it
2. There is sword fighting
3. It takes place during one of the designated historical periods (Sengoku period or the Edo period)

Even though Galloway intentionally tried to keep checklist short and broadly applicable, it quickly becomes clear that the checklist is not sufficient. Shortly after giving the checklist, Galloway already introduces a few exceptions to the rules. The most notable exception to the list are the films about Zatoichi. Since Zatoichi is not a samurai but a blind masseur, these films do not technically belong in the samurai genre if we would follow this checklist. The reason for Galloway to include these films, is that these films have “so much in common with samurai film (they are both *jidaigeki* and *chambara*) that to leave them out of the discussion would be too glaring an omission” (13).

Apart from the above mentioned criteria, it seems that there is something else that is of importance: the Japanese genres that are ascribed to samurai films. Of course, authors writing about the samurai film genre know about *jidaigeki* and *chambara* through their research. However, their interpretations of these genres differ. For example, Alain Silver (1983) doesn't dedicate part of his book to explaining *jidaigeki* and *chambara*, but he does use ‘*chambara*’ sometimes to refer to samurai films. This is because Silver defines *chambara* as “a generic designation for a samurai film” in the book's glossary (Silver 1983, 186). David Desser (1992) remarks that “the separation between vague terms as *jidaigeki*, samurai film and *chambara* is not clear-cut” in Japanese film criticism (Desser 1992, 155). Instead of trying to match ‘samurai film’ with one of the two Japanese labels, Desser sees all three of them as separate Japanese genres. Justin Howe (2010) explains *jidaigeki* and *chambara* as two clearly separate genres, with *chambara* as the equivalent to samurai film (Howe 2010, 85). These different perspectives on *jidaigeki* and *chambara* had an influence on the understanding of the samurai film genre by these authors.

Returning to Galloway, he explains that samurai films are *jidaigeki* and often *chambara* (Galloway 2005, 12), meaning that he doesn't see *chambara* as an equivalent to samurai films. Therefore, Zatoichi's status as maybe the most famous *chambara* protagonist in Japanese cinema is not enough on its own for his films to be included in Galloway's handbook, especially because Galloway considers these films to be technically *matatabi-eiga*

(wandering yakuza film). That's why he has to make an exception based on his opinion that they're *jidaigeki* and *chambara* enough – which seems to sort of translates as there being enough sword fighting and political intrigue – for them to be included. In contrast, Silver has no problem in including Zatoichi, because to Silver, *chambara* is a “generic designation” for samurai films. And in *chambara*, protagonists do not have to be samurai, which brings us to the first point of the checklist.

### 1. *The film has samurai in it*

It seems that the first and seemingly most important bullet point is actually the most difficult to work with. Because the films are called *samurai* films, one would expect that films feature samurai. However, because no such rule exists within *jidaigeki*, many characters are not (technically) samurai. More often, the characters are a certain type of outcast, like a ronin (ex-samurai) or, as we saw in the case of Zatoichi, a masseur. The fact that Western viewers still talk about the samurai film genre indicates that even if characters are not *technically* samurai, from a Western perspective they might look or act *like* samurai. In other words, the Western association with the word ‘samurai’ differs from the Japanese association of the word ‘samurai’.

To a Japanese viewer, the word ‘samurai’ is connected to a specific social class within the feudal system of the Edo Japan. The classes of samurai, farmer, craftsman and merchant each had their own function and rights within Japanese society. During the enforced peace under the Tokugawa shogunate, samurai became cut off from land and peasants, and had no opportunities to obtain power or riches through warfare. They were expected to live in castle towns and fulfil mostly bureaucratic functions while receiving a fixed income from their lord (Encyclopaedia of Japan). Therefore, a ronin (a samurai without a lord to serve) does not fit in the system, making him an outcast. This makes a ronin (or another type of outcast) a film character that can experience various hardships because he does not meet social expectations, but also a character that has more freedom to act within the system.

To a Western viewer, a ‘samurai’ is a Japanese warrior that lives by a code of honour. The fact that the genre is called ‘the samurai film genre’ instead of something like ‘the sword film genre’ or ‘the feudal film genre’, means that there is a certain captivating appeal to the figure of the samurai. An explanation for this strong appeal might be found in the continuing popularity of European chivalry. The figure of the honourable knight that dedicates himself to the ideals of chivalry has appeared in many Western tales throughout the ages. Western people tend to see a lot of similarities between the European knights from those tales and the

Japanese samurai. In his book *The Samurai Film* (1983), Alain Silver even refers to knights and chivalry to explain the history of samurai and their code of honour called bushido (Silver 1983, 13-15). According to Oleg Benesch (2014), these similarities are not coincidental. He explains that chivalry and bushido, in the way that we understand these ideal ethics nowadays, are both modern cultural inventions from the nineteenth and twentieth century (Benesch 2014, 1). In fact, in the late 1880s, Japanese discourse on bushido was inspired by chivalry because of comments from the Japanese politician Ozaki Yukio (1858-1954), who talked about bushido as a possible counterpart to English chivalry (5). The similarities to European chivalry, in combination with the orientalist appeal of Japanese-ness, make the samurai an appealing figure to Western audiences.

Also, the cultural context of the *jidaigeki* genre would be difficult for Western audiences to grasp. The struggle of being a ronin, a masseur or another type of outcast in feudal Japan would generally be unknown to a Western audience, as would be the changes that occur in the late Edo period or the social issues that are connected to Japanese modernity. However, a samurai that struggles with adhering to bushido is more understandable because of the similarities with European chivalry. It could explain to some extent the conflicts that happen in the films.

Nevertheless, it is slightly ironic that samurai do not frequently appear in samurai films. It also provides a challenge to those that want to define the genre. That's why authors like Silver and Dessler say that, although it is called the samurai film genre, it is actually the sword that is the key component of the genre.

## 2. *There is sword fighting*

This brings us to Galloway's second bullet point, which is about sword fighting. The sword, being the first weapon crafted specifically for killing another human being, has always been a powerful symbol of power in many cultures. However, according to Galloway, "It's impossible for a foreigner to fully grasp the historical and cultural importance of the sword in Japanese history. In no other country is it more traditionally revered" (Galloway 2005, 14). Also, Silver mentions that "Sir Richard Burton [author of *The Book of the Sword*] propounds a version of the mystique of the sword in the West; but that is only half the answer to an Easterner" (Silver 1983, 30), which means that the sword does not just stand for freedom and courage, but also for the very soul of its samurai owner. However, when explaining the censorship that occurred during the American occupation of Japan, Yoshimoto states that "there is something absurd about the Americans' excessive obsession with, and fear of, the

Japanese sword, which as an iconic image epitomizes for them feudal loyalty, revenge, and the irrational energy and brutality of the Japanese” (Yoshimoto 2000, 225). This fearful image of the Japanese sword eventually changed into an admiring one, certainly helped by the diplomatic efforts to strengthen the ties between the U.S. and Japan during the Cold War. The Japanese sword even gets glorified later on in Hollywood films like *Kill Bill* (2003) and *The Last Samurai* (2003). This does not mean that Japan knows no reverence for the sword. Instead, I want to argue that it is highly unlikely that the sword is more important in Japanese culture than in Western culture. Also, I think the Western reverence for the sword is more general in nature and not specifically tied to the Japanese sword, as Yoshimoto seems to argue. After all, there are quite some legendary swords that can be found in Western cultural tradition. Famous examples are Excalibur, the sword of King Arthur, and Durendal, the sword of Roland. Therefore, the huge importance that Western audiences give to the sword in samurai films says perhaps more about their own culture than Japanese culture.

Nevertheless, having the sword as a key element for the samurai film genre does solve the contradiction from the first point of the checklist. Although the protagonist is not a samurai, as long as he’s armed with a sword and fights with it, the film can be counted as a samurai film. Silver even says that a shot with a man and a sword is enough for a film to qualify as a samurai film (Silver 1983, 35). But if the appearance of a sword is already enough, then you could even question whether sword fighting is truly necessary for a samurai film.

### *3. It takes place during one of the designated historical periods*

Lastly, there is the setting of samurai films in the Sengoku or the Edo period. As we have seen earlier in this essay, it is indeed so that *jidaigeki* often have the Edo period as their setting. However, this is an idealized and nostalgic version of the Edo period, not an historically accurate portrayal. Of course, romanticized depictions of the past appear often in film. The difference here is that Western audiences have looked at samurai films as if they are products displaying traditional Japanese culture. Already during the American Occupation, the American censors believed *jidaigeki* propagated feudal ideals instead of commenting on modern issues. During the Cold War, Western critics always commented on the Japanese cultural roots when discussing the films. Although authors like Galloway and Silver do talk about the connection between samurai films and the post-war situation of Japan, it nevertheless seems that their focus is still more on the historical context of the samurai. This is why Yoshimoto thinks it is ironic that David Desser (1992) said that the “great paradox of

the Samurai Film is that it has nothing whatsoever to do with history and everything to do with myth". (Yoshimoto 2000, 213; Desser 1992, 163). To Yoshimoto, samurai films have a lot to do with Japanese history, but perhaps not the history Westerners are looking for.

### **The Big Three**

After analysing the checklist, it is now time to look at the body of films that has become representative of the samurai film genre. Within this corpus, the films of Kurosawa Akira (1910-1998), Kobayashi Masaki (1916-1996) and Hideo Gosha (1929-1992) are considered to be the best the genre has to offer (Silver 1983; Desser 1992; Galloway 2005; Howe 2010; Shimizu 2012). I shall first briefly introduce these three filmmakers. Then, I will broadly analyse if the films of these filmmakers follow the cultural conventions of the genre as determined by the checklist.

As we have seen in chapter one, Kurosawa is "the doorway through which most of us discover the cinema of Japan and, very likely, the samurai film" (Galloway 2005, 31). His films *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961) are almost always mentioned in various sources about the samurai film genre. In *Seven Samurai*, a village of farmers is seeking the help of seven ronin to protect them from bandits in exchange for a bowl of rice. In *Yojimbo*, the ronin Sanjuro arrives in a small town where two crime lords are in conflict. In the West, both films were remade as westerns: *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). Other *jidaigeki* films of Kurosawa that are well-known are *Throne of Blood* (1957), which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), which served as an inspiration for *Star Wars* (1977) and lastly *Sanjuro* (1962), which is a sequel to *Yojimbo*. Although Western viewers usually see Kurosawa's samurai films as "emblematic of the Japanese past", in Japan there's debate about Kurosawa's Japanese-ness, because he draws inspiration from Western literature and Hollywood cinema (Russell 2002, 5).

Next is Kobayashi, but paying special attention to him as a filmmaker of samurai films is perhaps a bit odd if you look at his oeuvre: only two out of his twenty-two films is considered a samurai film. *Harakiri* (1962) and *Samurai Rebellion* (1967) both tell a story in which *bushido* is heavily criticised. According to Galloway, "Masaki Kobayashi, more than any of his contemporaries, was committed to pointing out the hypocrisies and abuses of power inherent in the Japanese feudal code" (Galloway 2005, 128).

Lastly, Gosha is best known for *Three Outlaw Samurai* (1964), *The Sword of the Beast* (1965) and *Goyokin* (1969). In contrast to Kobayashi, Gosha has made many films that could be considered a samurai film, but many of them did not travel to the West. Galloway says

about Gosha's film *Tenchu* (1969) that it "has long been considered the holy grail of samurai pictures. Why? For one thing, it's so hard to find! It was made by Hideo Gosha, one of the finest directors in the history of Japanese cinema, and yet a director criminally unknown in the U.S., hence the paucity and relative obscurity of his title here" (140). Only *Three Outlaw Samurai* and *Sword of the Beast* have been released by Criterion, making those films easier accessible for Western audiences.

Looking at this selection, a few things are noticeable. First of all, Kurosawa presence is enormous in comparison with the other two filmmakers. Of course, it doesn't help that Kobayashi only produced two samurai films and that Gosha's films only marginally travelled to the West. Also, both Kurosawa and Kobayashi are filmmakers that received critical awards at Western film festivals. Gosha has not received a Western film award, but the reason that he is mentioned seems to partly come from his ability to use and combine elements from both Kurosawa and Kobayashi (Silver 1983, 117, 120-121; Galloway 2005, 34-35). Still, the inclusion of Gosha seems odd if his films are so difficult to find in the West. This might be connected to the fact that the samurai film genre is often thought of as a Japanese genre. If authors like Silver and Howe see *chambara* films as samurai films, then it would be more logical to include Gosha. Though, in that case, wouldn't it be fitting if more emphasis was put on the Zatoichi films? Or perhaps films about Miyamoto Musashi? These two characters are immensely popular in the *chambara* genre. On the other hand, it was likely the fact that filmmakers as Kurosawa and Kobayashi did something new within the genre that gave them their importance as samurai film directors (apart from the quality of their films).

Next, I want to look at the films themselves and see to what extent they confirm the checklist of the genre. Because my research focuses on Kurosawa, I will mostly talk about his samurai films, in particular *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo*. The first point of the checklist was that there should be samurai in a samurai film. However, in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*, the main characters are ronin. For example, when we are introduced to the character Kambei at the beginning of *Seven Samurai*, he is in the process of shaving off his topknot, one of the status symbols of being a samurai. The reason for shaving his head was so he could pretend to be a monk in order to deceive a thief that was holding a child hostage. Another example from *Seven Samurai* is Kikuchiyo, who turns out to be a farmer that pretends to be a samurai. In *Yojimbo*, it is clear that the protagonist Sanjuro is a ronin from the way he looks: he is a scruffy man that wears an old kimono with a faded family crest, and his hair is styled in a topknot without having shaved the top of his head. According to Fukushima, this style of depicting a ronin was done first in *Yojimbo* (Fukushima 2017, 100).

Furthermore, samurai are known in the West for their sense of honour. They should live following the samurai code of bushido. However, in Kurosawa's films, the actions of the characters do not necessarily feel like they are motivated by a code of honour, but rather by a sense of compassion or a wish to do good. Russell mentions that there is a certain sense of humanist ideology that can be found in Kurosawa's films (Russell 2002, 10). Characters like Kambei and Sanjuro act because of a sense of compassion for those that are vulnerable. Of course, having compassion is often considered honourable behaviour, so in that sense you could say that Kurosawa's characters in *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* are honourable men. But instead of only portraying the ideal warrior (the ideal of bushido), there are also those that are average fighters (Heihachi), lie about who they are (Kikuchiyo) or deceive employers to get more money (Sanjuro).

The second point on the checklist demands that there is sword fighting. There is indeed sword fighting in Kurosawa's samurai films, but there is some difference between the way the sword and swordplay is treated in these films and the perceived high importance the Japanese sword should have from a Western perspective. For example, swords are used in *Seven Samurai*, but they are not depicted as the superior weapon in the fight scenes. The weapon that poses the greatest threat are the firearms that are in possession of the bandits. Also dangerous is the bow, which effectively takes out several of the farmers. The farmers themselves fight with self-made spears, which are easy to use and quite effective due to their long reach. Yes, the ronin fight with their swords, but this is not the focus of the fight scenes. In *Yojimbo*, fighting scenes are indeed focussed on swordplay, but in this film it is the attitude towards the sword that is different. Far from seeing his sword as his soul, Sanjuro doesn't seem to care which sword he uses in a fight. At the end of the film, Sanjuro decides to leave his hiding place and confront Unosuke, but unfortunately he lost his sword. Armed with just a knife, Sanjuro starts to leave for the duel, but he is stopped by one of the townsmen that helped him. Exclaiming that he possibly can't go to a duel with just a knife, the townsman gives Sanjuro a random sword that belonged to someone who died. Quickly inspecting the sword, Sanjuro decides that it will have to do, and leaves.

The last point of the checklist concerns the setting. For *Seven Samurai*, Kurosawa wanted to make a film that showed the past more accurately. However, while researching how samurai lived in the Edo period, it became clear that details about a samurai's daily life were almost impossible to find (Yoshimoto 2000, 205). Therefore, even if a filmmaker like Kurosawa creates a sense of realism in his films, Western audiences cannot expect it to be historically accurate.

What is interesting is that Kurosawa's films do not always reflect what a samurai film should be. It is true that I have mainly looked at two of his films, but *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* are the most well-known samurai films of Kurosawa in the West. With Kurosawa having the largest presence in the samurai film genre, it would be logical that the Western notion of samurai films would closely reflect what is shown in Kurosawa's films. But perhaps from the perspective of many Western viewers, these films *do* reflect their idea of what a samurai film should be. Interpretation is very subjective after all, and Kurosawa's films have long been viewed from an orientalist perspective.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have looked at the checklist and the corpus of the samurai film genre to better understand the Western notion of a samurai film genre. Looking at the checklist, it has become clear that the Western idea of a samurai is that of a 'honourable Japanese swordsman' instead of a specific class within the Japanese feudal system. Instead of an outcast struggling in a society that has no place for them, Western viewers will likely interpret it instead as a samurai struggling with bushido, the warrior code of honour that is similar to the European ideal of chivalry. Also, despite the name of 'samurai film', it is actually the sword that is considered to be the key element within the genre. There is the Western idea that Japan values the sword above all other countries. This fixation on the sword might say more about Western culture than Japanese culture. Lastly, the setting of samurai films is often Edo Japan. However, although Western viewers will look at this setting as if it is displaying traditional Japanese culture, it is actually an idealized and nostalgic version of the Edo period instead of a historically accurate portrayal.

After the checklist, I have looked at the three filmmakers Kurosawa, Kobayashi and Gosha that are often named as the representative directors within the genre. Within the genre, Kurosawa has the largest presence. Therefore, it would have been logical if the Western notion of samurai films would closely reflect what is shown in Kurosawa's films. Yet, this is not the case.



## Chapter 3: Inspired By Kurosawa

### *Kurosawa Mode in the Videogame Ghost of Tsushima*

In chapter one, we have seen that samurai films were introduced to the West under certain circumstances. Because of the political tension during the Cold War, the U.S. wanted to present a more positive image of Japan to its citizens so that they would be more favourable of having Japan as a political ally. American citizens were encouraged to appreciate 'Japanese traditional culture' and watching Japanese films in art-house cinema was one of the ways to do so. One of the roles Japan played in these efforts was to select which films were exported to the West in order to change Japan's image into that of a sophisticated nation. It were the films of Kurosawa that were exported first and thus became the first introduction of many Western viewers to Japanese cinema. Because the meaning of the Japanese *jidaigeki* genre is dependent on the Japanese cultural context, it could not be used for informing Western audiences. To fill this gap, Western audiences formed a notion of a samurai film genre that they used to identify and interpret *jidaigeki* films. The cultural conventions of the samurai film genre, as we have seen in chapter two, differ from those of the *jidaigeki* genre. The problematic thing is that these Western cultural conventions about samurai films are thought of as Japanese cultural conventions.

In this chapter, I want to look at the presence of the Western notion of a samurai film genre in popular media. Samurai films, especially the films of Kurosawa, are still a source of inspiration for many content creators. As a case study, I will analyse the way Kurosawa's samurai films have inspired the creation of the videogame *Ghost of Tsushima*. First of all, I will briefly introduce *Ghost of Tsushima* and the relevant context behind its production. From the explanation of creating a 'Hamburger Samurai', it is clear that the team believed they were adding something to a Japanese genre. Next, I will discuss the in-game Kurosawa Mode, which was made as a format through which players can experience the story of *Ghost of Tsushima* in the Kurosawa's 'iconic style'. However, what players get in Kurosawa Mode is simply the look and sound of a film shot in the 1950s-1960s. Following this, I will look at some film techniques that Kurosawa would often use, to see if Kurosawa Mode could have been more than a fifties filter. However, it will become clear that such techniques would be difficult to implement in a game like *Ghost of Tsushima* because of its 3D open world with a third-person perspective. Lastly, I will look at the way the creators used and interpreted Kurosawa's films as inspiration for the game. The reason why the creators wanted to call it

'Kurosawa Mode', was to honour the filmmaker that had been their greatest inspiration for the game. I will look at the way that inspiration can or cannot be found in the game.

### **Ghost of Tsushima**

The videogame *Ghost of Tsushima* was developed by the American videogame developer Sucker Punch Productions and released in 2020. The game is described as a an adaptation of "samurai historical fantasy" (Inverse 28-07-2020). The story takes place on the Japanese island of Tsushima during the first Mongol Invasion in 1274. The player takes control of the samurai Jin Sakai, who must drive off the Mongols from his homeland. In order to achieve this, Jin has to let go of bushido and become "the Ghost", a master of underhand tactics.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Sucker Punch director Nate Fox compares the game to a "Spaghetti Western", a non-American film about an American genre. Therefore, he says that the game can be seen as a 'Hamburger Samurai', where it is a non-Japanese studio trying to create a love letter to a Japanese genre (*Ghost of Tsushima* Director's Cut 2021, Director's Commentary, 2:27-2:55). Instead of pointing directly to Japanese samurai films, Fox mentions both films and comic books as part of the genre, pointing to a broader "samurai genre". However, with his explanation of their Hamburger Samurai being comparable to the Spaghetti Western, it is strongly suggested that films are an important part of this genre, and therefore also as source of inspiration for *Ghost of Tsushima*. This becomes even more apparent when looking at the in-game 'Kurosawa Mode', an alternative way of experiencing the game through a "cinematic format that mirrors the filmmaker's iconic style" (Entertainment Weekly 08-07-2020).

### **Stylish Old Aesthetics**

Although Sucker Punch took inspiration from many sources, the influence of Kurosawa's work was so strong that the team decided to honour the filmmaker and pitched the idea of a 'Kurosawa Mode' to Kurosawa's estate to get the official blessing. In this mode, the player can experience the game with certain adjustments aimed at creating the feeling of being in a Kurosawa film. First of all, there are Japanese dubbed voices with English subtitles available, but the most noticeable adjustment is the black-and-white filter. Jason Connell, creative director at Sucker Punch, explains that it is no ordinary filter. He says that they did research on "the curves that may have existed on that kind of film that [Kurosawa] might've used" and that they "took various black-and-white samurai films and analyzed scenes from various times of day and weather conditions" (Entertainment Weekly 08-07-2020). Other adjustments of

Kurosawa Mode are a film grain, adjusted audio that mimics sound of a TV from the fifties and lastly, an increased wind function. Yet, these adjustments have nothing specifically to do with Kurosawa's style of filming, but rather with the look and feel of a film from the 1950s-60s. In other words, it gives the player the feeling of playing inside a samurai film from the fifties, whether it was from Kurosawa or not.

On top of that, in terms of gameplay, there are even drawbacks to Kurosawa Mode. Dodging, parrying and aiming the bow become more challenging, because the black-and-white filter makes things less distinguishable than if one would play in colour. Some of the side quests even rely on the player to recognise colours, which means you have to toggle off Kurosawa Mode to complete the quest (Inverse 28-07-2020). It is interesting that the creators of *Ghost of Tsushima* have put time and effort into adding something extra to the game that doesn't always work in favour of the game. Still, it seems many players have enjoyed playing in Kurosawa Mode, meaning that the black-and-white aesthetics of films from the 1950s-60s have a strong appeal.

The idea to use black-and-white aesthetics as a homage to samurai films is not uniquely tied to *Ghost of Tsushima*. Another example is the recently released videogame called *Trek to Yomi* by the American videogame publisher Devolver Digital. Produced by Leonard Menchiari and Polish game studio Flying Wild Hog, *Trek to Yomi* is a "cinematic black-and-white samurai epic" (Flying Wild Hog website). According to Flying Wild Hog, the game is meant as a "love letter to all the classic Japanese samurai movies of the years gone by". Although both Devolver Digital and Flying Wild Hog don't mention Kurosawa's name when introducing the game on their website, reviewers never fail to mention Kurosawa as a source of inspiration for the game (for example, GamesRadar+ 05-05-2022; PC Gamer 12-05-2022). Apart from the black-and-white aesthetics, *Trek to Yomi* also comes with Japanese voice acting, just like Kurosawa Mode in *Ghost of Tsushima*.

### **Composition, Cuts and Camera Control**

Kurosawa Mode was made as a format through which players can experience the story of *Ghost of Tsushima* in the filmmaker's iconic style. What the player actually gets in Kurosawa Mode is the look and sound of a film shot in the 1950s-1960s. With the adjustments that were made, the name of any director of samurai films could have been used instead of Kurosawa specifically. The only thing that might be tied to Kurosawa is the increased wind function, because of the extreme weather conditions that often appear in his films (Russell 2002, 11). What other adjustment could have been made to let Kurosawa Mode live up to its name?

There are a few things people often mention about Kurosawa's cinematic style. One of those things is composition. Donald Richie (1984) says Kurosawa frames a shot as if it is a photograph. Much thought is put into the placement of actors, the props and the scenery in order to communicate something extra. Richie gives the example of two or more people having a conversation while facing different directions. In *Yojimbo*, it is used to communicate a feeling of danger, because the characters keep being on the lookout for enemies while talking (Richie 1984, 218-219). However, in a game like *Ghost of Tsushima*, Kurosawa's style in relation to composition is difficult to implement. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, the interactive camera allows the player to adjust the orientation and the distance of the camera while playing in an 3D open environment. There is still a tracking system implemented that automatically adjust the camera to give the best shot, but in most instances the player can take control of the camera to adjust it to their liking. The place where the creators can play with the composition are the cutscenes. However, many cutscenes include dialogue, where the creators mainly used the more general shot/reverse shot technique.

Another thing that is often mentioned about Kurosawa's style is his use of editing. Russell emphasises Kurosawa's use of the wipe-cut, calling it one of his signatures (Russell 2002, 9). Richie talks more about the incredible amount of cuts Kurosawa makes, creating a lot of short scenes that together give Kurosawa's films a 'flowing' quality (Richie 1984, 224-225). Yet again, this technique is also mostly irrelevant for a game like *Ghost of Tsushima*. Just like the problem with composition, the player controls the camera, deciding what to see. Also, to let the player move through the world as freely as possible, to create the feeling that they are actively taking part in that fantasy world, many short cuts would disrupt the immersion.

In short, many film techniques that could be used to specifically refer to Kurosawa's as a filmmaker, cannot be used in the 3D open world type of game that *Ghost of Tsushima* is. In a game like *Trek to Yomi*, which is mostly a 2D side-scrolling game with a fixed camera, there is more opportunity to make use of Kurosawa's film techniques. But for *Ghost of Tsushima*, the current Kurosawa Mode is apparently as close to Kurosawa's style as they could get without changing the cutscenes.

### **Inspired By Kurosawa**

Kurosawa Mode creates the feeling of being inside a samurai film from the 1950s-60s, but not necessarily one from Kurosawa. Yet, the reason for wanting to add the name of Kurosawa to this mode, was because Kurosawa's films had such a strong influence on the creation of the

game (Entertainment Weekly 08-07-2020). Where in the game can this strong influence be detected?

Two films of Kurosawa that greatly inspired the creators were *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo*. As we have seen in chapter two, this is not surprising considering that these two films are known as the must-see films of the samurai film genre. About *Seven Samurai*, Nate Fox (creative director) says that it's "impossible for me to think about what it is to be a samurai without picturing the warriors brought so vividly to life in this film" (GamesRadar+ 15-07-2020). For Fox, it created an image of the samurai that fights with "dignity and heart" and is an "iconic ideal" that one must strive to live up to. For Jason Connell (art/creative director), *Yojimbo* instilled in him "what it means to be a wandering ronin, moving calmly towards a group of enemies without a care in the world". The influence of this scene in *Yojimbo*, together with the final duel in *Sanjuro*, can be seen in the duels and stand-offs in the game. Also, like in *Seven Samurai*, they made the ground very muddy, meaning that Jin will often be covered in mud if the player rolled out of the way to evade an attack. Connell also mentions *Ran* (1985) for many aesthetic elements, such as the samurai banners, and Billy Harper (animations director) adds *Red Beard* (1965) as inspiration for the relationship between Jin and his uncle.

When the creative team talks about their sources of inspiration, they usually start with naming a samurai film from Kurosawa. But after that, many other sources of inspiration follow. One of them is *Usagi Yojimbo*, a comic series that is loosely based on the life of Miyamoto Musashi. The protagonist of the comic is a "very quiet, soft-spoken person who uses his sword in a snap to solve problems in any town he walks into" (GamesRadar+ 19-05-2020) has clearly been an inspiration for *Ghost of Tsushima's* Jin Sakai. Also, modern films like *The Last Samurai* (2003) and *13 Assassins* (2010), as well as videogames like *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins* (1998) and *Onimusha: Warlords* (2001) have been named as important sources of inspiration (GamesRadar+ 15-07-2020).

The reason why I name these other sources as well, is to show that, nowadays, the figure of the samurai appears in various types of media. But when asked about the inspiration for a samurai story, 'Kurosawa' will probably be the name that is first mentioned. Because every new samurai story brings their own elements to this broad 'samurai genre', it is possible that the name of Kurosawa can become associated with elements that do not appear in his films. Especially if such elements can be consumed through a Kurosawa Mode.

## Conclusion

In chapter three, I used the videogame *Ghost of Tsushima* as a case study to look at the presence of the Western notion of a samurai film genre in popular media. *Ghost of Tsushima* is described as a Hamburger Samurai, because the American developer Sucker Punch has created a game that follows the conventions of a genre that they do not consider to be an American or a Western genre. The creators added an in-game Kurosawa Mode to honour Kurosawa Akira as their biggest source of inspiration. The mode consists of a black-and-white filter, film grain, adjusted audio and lastly, an increased wind function. Yet, these adjustments have more to do with films from the 1950-60s in general than specifically with Kurosawa's cinematic style. Also, film techniques like composition and types of cuts are difficult to implement in a game like *Ghost of Tsushima*. Being a 3D open world game, the player is usually in control of the camera. The cutscenes could have been a place to refer more directly to Kurosawa's style. Lastly, the team from Sucker Punch has also used many other sources of inspiration besides the samurai films of Kurosawa. Yet, Kurosawa remains the source that is always mentioned first when talking about the inspiration for a work about samurai.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I asked the question where the Western notion of a samurai film genre comes from and what role the Japanese filmmaker Kurosawa Akira played in establishing this genre. Because genre does not have a universal, transnational essence by which it can be defined, its definition is dependent on the culture in which the genre is used. It serves as a blueprint for production, a label for distribution and as a certain social contract between consumers and producers. However, this usage of genre cannot be applied to the samurai film genre. This is because the films that are considered to be samurai films are a selection of Japanese *jidaigeki* films from 1950s-60s.

Japanese cinema are classified into two mega-genres: *jidaigeki* (period film) and *gendai geki* (modern film). The period most *jidaigeki* are set in is the Edo period (early 1600s to 1867). By using Edo Japan as a setting, filmmakers could show sword fighting as their element of spectacle, while at the same time tell a story about the anxieties of a changing society. Although the setting of the *jidaigeki* genre is in the past, it is a modern genre about the complexity of Japanese modernity. Because the *jidaigeki* genre is dependent on the Japanese cultural context, it could not be used for Western audiences. In its absence, Western audiences formed the samurai film genre.

To create a more positive Western image of Japan during the Cold War, certain Japanese films were shown in Western art-house cinemas as upper-class products of an unique cultural tradition. Combined with the orientalist gaze of the audience, it influenced the interpretation of Japanese films. As a result, Western cultural conventions that would eventually create the samurai film genre were thought of as Japanese cultural conventions based on Japanese cultural tradition. Therefore, the samurai film genre is a Western construct.

Kurosawa's samurai films were the first to be shown in the West. Because of the political context of the Cold War and orientalist perspectives of the time, Kurosawa's 'samurai films' were seen as products of high quality that showed traditional Japanese culture. Because his films were the most widely exported outside Japan, Kurosawa's name became representative of the Western understanding of Japanese national cinema, including the samurai film genre. Yet, his films do not always correctly reflect the Western understanding of the samurai film genre. Many of his characters are not technically samurai and they don't treat their sword as if it is their 'soul'. Although Kurosawa often added a sense of realism to

his films, his work does not accurately portray traditional Japanese culture, as it is often believed in the West.

Nevertheless, Kurosawa's name has become closely tied to the Western notion of the samurai film genre. In the videogame *Ghost of Tsushima*, that was created as a love letter to the genre, the creators added a Kurosawa Mode to honour the filmmaker as their biggest source of inspiration. The mode consists of a black-and-white filter, film grain, adjusted audio and lastly, an increased wind function. Yet, these adjustments have more to do with films from the 1950-60s in general than specifically with Kurosawa's cinematic style. A reason for this could be that many of Kurosawa's frequently used film techniques are difficult to implement in a 3D open world game like *Ghost of Tsushima*, because the player can usually take control of the camera. The team from Sucker Punch did also use many other sources of inspiration besides Kurosawa's samurai films. Yet, Kurosawa remains the source that is always mentioned first when talking about the inspiration for a samurai work, overshadowing all other creators that are or will be part of the 'samurai genre'.

There are many ways how the research in this thesis can be expanded. For example, there are many Western works making use of Western samurai conventions that have made their way to Japan and have been received enthusiastically. *Ghost of Tsushima* is one of such examples. What does that say about the contemporary image of the samurai in Japan? Also, because of *Ghost of Tsushima*'s popularity, there will be a film adaptation of the game. It will be interesting to see what decisions will be made in adapting a game that was heavily inspired by Japanese films.



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