

Virtual Soapbox



Samurai vs. Cowboys Kathie Gust *

Some musings on the relationship between Japanese Samurai and American Western genres of film making, and a short list of picks, from a costumer who enjoys both.

Which came first the Samurai film or the Western? Actually, they both came into being at about the same time, during the silent film era. Although American film fans may not be familiar with the films of Daisuke Itō, Masahiro Makino, or Hideo Gosha, many of us have seen at least one of Akira Kurosawa's epics. Some of us even realize that they were the inspiration for some of Hollywood (or Italy's!) most popular western plots.

One major difference between the two genres is time. Most Westerns are set from 1860 forward. Most, but not all, Samurai films (Chanbara) are set in Tokugawa era (1600–1868) Japan when the Samurai way of life was ending due to changes in Japanese society.

During this era the civil wars of the previous 125 years ended. Warriors were no longer needed by warlords and roamed the

land as masterless men struggling to survive by their wits and swords.

One enduring theme of the genre is the conflict between conscience (ninjo) and duty (giri). This conflict is present regardless of the films' time setting and can result in the viewer deciding whether the main character is hero or anti-hero. The samurai film also contends with class differences in a way that most westerns do not, demonstrating the helplessness of the peasantry in the face of an upper class skilled in the use of weaponry and showing the distinction between the two classes sometimes very graphically.

The genre basically requires very little for a movie to qualify as a samurai film, only the presence of one or more samurai, and some sword fighting (chanbara). The popular Clint Eastwood character "the man with no name" first began life as Sanjuro (which means "thirty-ish male"), a wandering ronin (masterless samurai) played by Toshirō Mifune in two Kurosawa

films, *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*, which stressed the theme of the masterless samurai searching for a place in society.

Like the Western, Samurai films tend to drift in and out of fashion. Fewer seem to be made today because the elder generation of directors and actors are passing on. One popular, and highly respected, director still working in this decade is Yōji Yamada.

I suppose I should also include a brief mention of samurai films that influenced another genre other than the Western. The

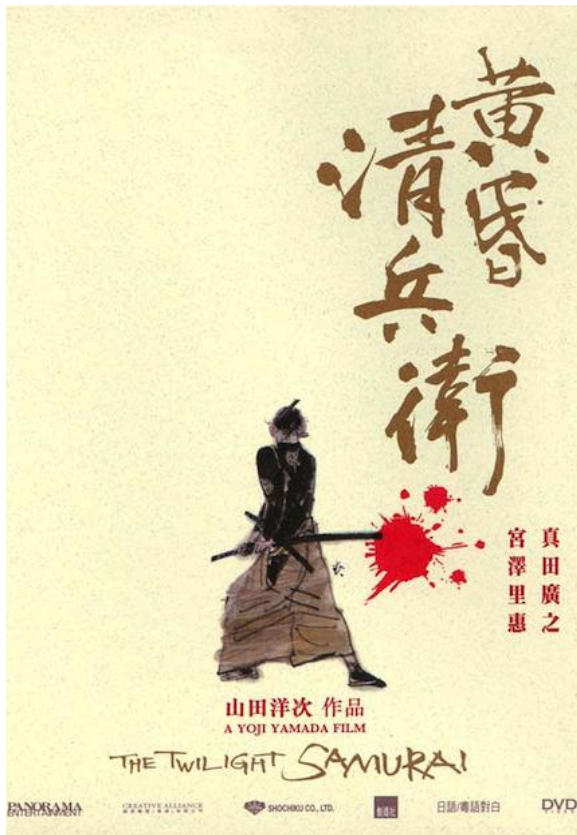
Seven Samurai is not only the inspiration for *The Magnificent Seven*, but also *Battle Beyond the Stars*, and most fans know that *The Hidden Fortress* was a major influence on George Lucas when he made *Star Wars*.

Here's a short list of films you might enjoy that also feature some wonderful examples of costuming.

Red Sun (1972). This is technically a Western since it is set in the American west, but has a samurai character. In the plot, the samurai character's code of honor (bushido) influences an American bandit to return a stolen katana.



Twilight Samurai (2002). Nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 76th U.S. Academy Awards, *Twilight Samurai* went on to win an unprecedented number of Japanese Academy Awards. The film is different from many other samurai-themed films in that it concentrates on the main character's everyday struggles, instead of the action-oriented battle sequences. It is considered a particularly accurate portrayal of the historical period it represents, both culturally and in its costuming. It is the first of a loose trilogy along with *Hidden Blade* (2004) and *Love and Honor* (2006).



Yojimbo (1961). This Akira Kurosawa film is a true classic. It was the inspiration for both *A Fistful of Dollars* and *Last Man Standing*. In some respects is the perfect lone-gunman/rogue samurai film. Simply one of the best, either as a samurai movie or a western. *Yojimbo* is Kurosawa's most popular film in Japan.



Seven Samurai (1954). After all that praise for Yojimbo, it's hard to believe anything could top it. but if there is one samurai movie that can, *Seven Samurai* is it. This film holds up as one of the best, high quality, samurai movies ever made. While



true fans of Kurosawa will nominate *Ran* or *Yojimbo* as his masterpieces, there's no denying that *Seven Samurai* has remained his most popular film in the United States. Its plot innovations influenced later films, especially *The Magnificent Seven*. If you have the chance, don't hesitate to see it.

Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genre. Visit her [web site](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.