



Visual Performances of U.S.-Japan Cultural Relations



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Introduction

Since World War II, the rapidly-shifting international cultural landscape has led to Western media portrayals of Japan and Japanese culture, the accuracy and circumstances surrounding which are uncertain. Under the guidance of Dr. Christina Owens, this project examines how visual performance media originating from the United States, specifically in film and social media, represent the country's relationship with Japan. This research aims to encourage exploration of the alliance between Japan and the United States, as well as to better learn about the racialized tensions and/or dangers of fascination with exoticism that may or may not be exacerbated by media consumption.

Methods

A Microsoft Excel archive consisting of primary texts (e.g. films, TikTok videos, and Youtube videos), commentary texts, and scholarly texts. After completing this database, we selected primary texts to code for further information, based on our respective genres ("Film" and "Social Media"). This project then culminated in two literature reviews.

Results

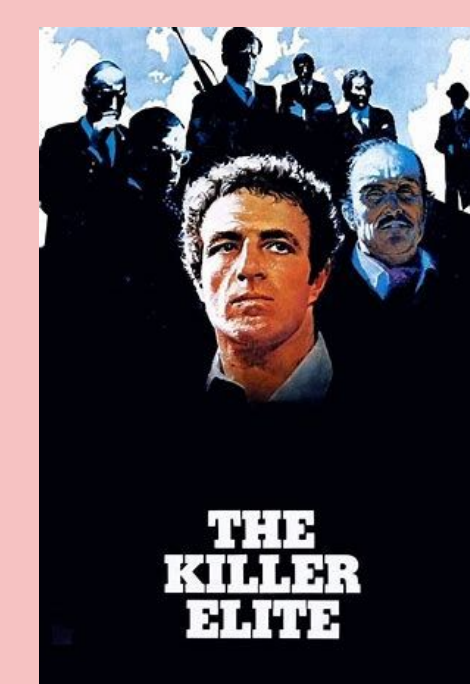
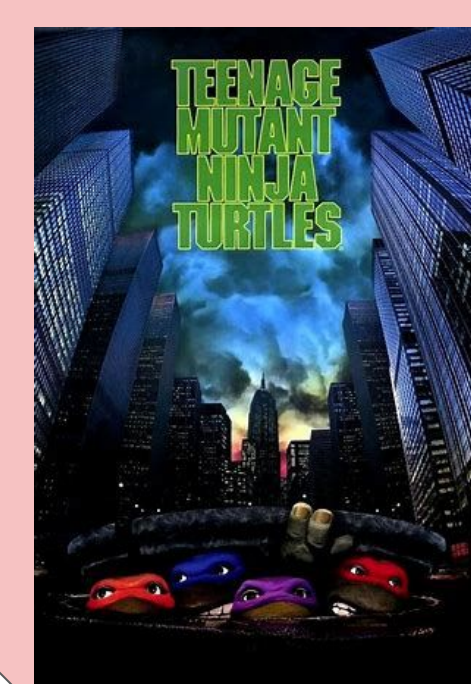
Through the examination of American film and social media, it is clear that, though tropes and trends surrounding the portrayal of U.S.-Japanese relations have grown more politically-correct with time, many misconceptions still remain. In Western film, Japanese culture and persons have been depicted as distinctly "other" or exotic, reinforced by tropes of white saviorism (see "Film" section for more information). In Western social media, Japan is portrayed as an escape from reality, while simultaneously considered inferior due to cultures differences (see "Social Media" for more information). The continued portrayal of American superiority could create a sort of delegitimization of Japanese experiences in America.

Film

After completing our source database, we found that many of our sources revolved around a sort of historical American obsession with ninjas and Japanese martial arts. As such, we selected seven films to analyze in-depth based on their cultural significance, genre variety, and recency. These films were the original *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* trilogy (1990-1993), *Beverly Hills Ninja* (1997), *Surf Ninjas* (1993), *The Killer Elite* (1975), and *Ninja* (2009).

A common thread between all these films was an emphasis on American saviorism. Japanese ninjas were often at odds with American ninjas because, while Japanese ninjas trained heavily and were disciplined, they lacked an inherent quality (chalked up to "heart", "grit", or simply "kindness" in a few films) that led to our American protagonists' success. These distinct moments, and the ways in which they were portrayed throughout all seven films, indicated a sort of inherent American idealism that was distinctly at odds with Japanese exoticism and mysticism. Meditation and astral projection were two elements seen in the *Ninja Turtles* trilogy and *Beverly Hills Ninja*, displaying a sense of "otherness" with regard to Japanese persons' place in a Westernized society.

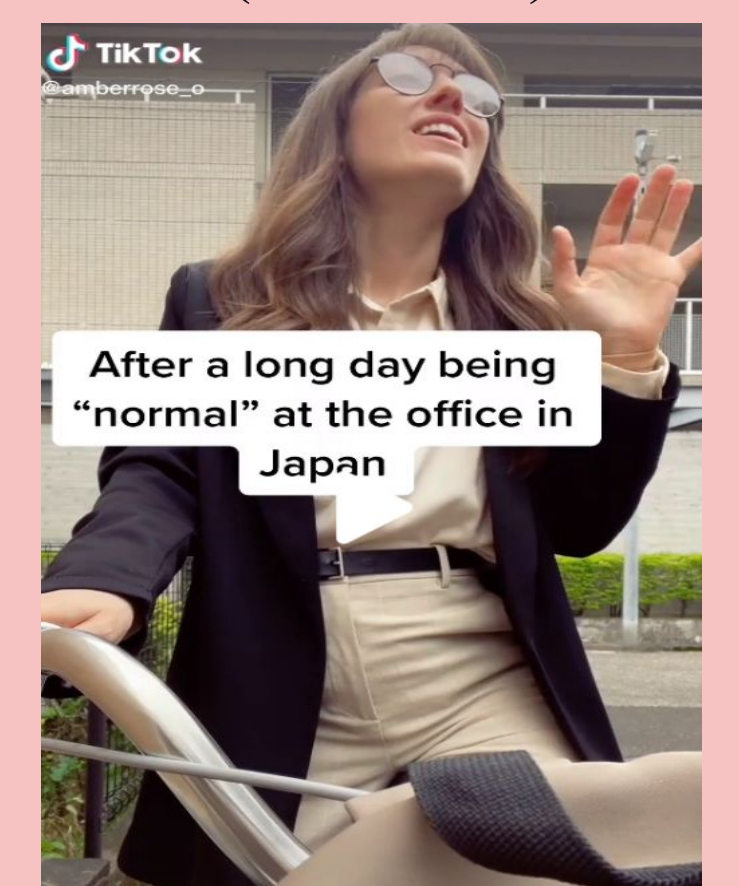
	Year	Director	Notable Elements/Keywords
Ninja Turtles Trilogy	1990, 1991, 1993	Steve Barron, Michael Pressman, Stuart Gillard	Japanese mysticism; American saviorism; Japanese "otherness"; historical relevance
Beverly Hills Ninja	1997	Dennis Dugan	Comedy; white saviorism; "American spirit" vs. "Japanese skill"
Surf Ninjas	1993	Neal Israel	Comedy; slapstick; nineties
The Killer Elite	1975	Sam Peckinpah	Japanese villainization; historical relevance
Ninja	2009	Isaac Florentine	White American saviorism; modern; counterpart to Beverly Hills Ninja



Social Media

While collecting and completing the archive for TikToks and Youtube videos, there appeared to be many common themes within the visual performances.

- U.S. people of color often experience more freedom in Japan, receive more career/school opportunities, and feel safer compared to their home country. They are welcomed as an "American" rather than being discriminated against because of their skin tone.
- Some American content creators glorify and exoticize Japan to their audiences, selling Japanese culture through branding its "otherness" and "foreignness." This sense of otherness continues to encourage separation between the East and the West.
- The latter point could be due to how creators are embedded within American cultural trajectories that emphasize U.S. superiority. These issues are seen across East Asia as, "creators from the U.S., Europe, or Canada who make public content about their lives in Korea, modeling their lifestyles for a global audience, cannot entirely escape the historical weight of colonialism that their online/offline presence carries." (Swan 43).



References

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