

ticular or fixed ideology. Although both favor readings that ultimately uphold a dominant white, male, bourgeois ideology, enough gaps remain to draw in marginalized viewers. Hollywood's white knights do have their appeal to female and non-Western viewers, since they represent social advancement, assimilation, and the promise of the American Dream.

To recognize both the pull of these fantasies as well as their ability to subordinate many of the viewers drawn in by them, neither race, gender, ethnicity, nor class can be taken as isolated categories for analysis. If, on the one hand, issues of race and assimilation were taken in isolation, for example, both *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* and *The World of Suzie Wong* might be celebrated as liberal calls for racial harmony and tolerance. On the other hand, if gender issues were paramount, Han Suyin might be held up as a model of the emerging "new" professional woman of the postwar era and Suzie simply condemned as another incarnation of the Hollywood child-woman or "whore with the heart of gold" favored on American screens since the silent era. If, however, the films were treated only as cold war parables, the insistent, patriarchal discourses that shore up American identity as well as male privilege would be lost to the analysis. The figure of the white knight endures because of these narratives' ability to flexibly take into account a variety of ideological positions for a heterogeneous audience.

Tragic and Transcendent Love

Sayonara and *The Crimson Kimono*

Within the body of Western literature depicting romantic love, parallel pairs of lovers with opposed fates play a key role—for example, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. In *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, unresolvable ideological issues brought up by Cathy's relationship with the dark, brooding founding Heathcliff (e.g., issues concerning class, race, incest, and the excessive qualities of women's sexual passion) are displaced onto a younger generation where they find a certain equilibrium and sense of closure. If the excessive passions of the first tragic couple promise the transcendence of social taboos in death, then the second, younger couple allows for the possibility of a more earthly transcendence of cultural norms through their romance.

Thus, these narratives offer a dual perspective on the sexual taboos with which they deal. Death allows the first tragic couple to criticize society without changing it. This provides a sense of the inexorable workings of fate rather than a genuine plea for reform. The second couple, however, absorbs the social criticism of the first, weakens it, and allows for its accommodation within a slightly modified social order.

Hollywood has often used the device of parallel love stories to achieve similar ends. In the case of the interracial romance, the two couples provide the tragic "punishment" for those who cross racial barriers as well as the liberal "happy ending" for those who can be assimilated into the American mainstream. The tragic couple acts ambivalently as both the voice of social critique and as confirmation of the

racial status quo. The couple that transcends the social taboo against miscegenation usually provides a weaker indictment of racism, since their union, at the conclusion of the film, confirms that American society is the tolerant melting pot it claims to be.

Moreover, the differences between the couples tend to mollify their usefulness as romantic critiques of a rigidly racist culture. For example, the tragic couple may not only break racial taboos but also challenge other cultural norms involving class divisions, gender roles, the patriarchal organization of the family, or heterosexuality. Race may be only the most obvious element in their inevitably doomed relationship. Similarly, the couple that transcends racial taboos may otherwise be the model of the American, bourgeois, patriarchal, heterosexual norm. Thus, these parallel couples tend to soften any genuine social criticism either the pathos of the tragic end or the relief of the happy union may otherwise provide.

Sayonara (Joshua Logan, 1957) and *The Crimson Kimono* (Samuel Fuller, 1959) provide two examples of Hollywood's use in the 1950s of the parallel love story to treat the issue of interracial sexuality. Although *Sayonara* is a large-budget, Academy Award-winning star vehicle and *The Crimson Kimono* a grade B exploitation film, closer examination reveals the profound structural similarities between these two films as well as the similar ways in which each orchestrates ideological contradictions arising from race, class, and gender representations.

Love and Death in *Sayonara*

Sayonara (based on a novel by James A. Michener) deals with a love affair between Major Lloyd Gruver (Marlon Brando), a pilot serving in the Korean War, and Hana Ogi (Miiko Taka), a star of Matsubayashi, an all-female musical company. Other interracial relationships parallel this principal one, including those between Gruver's Anglo-American fiancée, Eileen Webster (Patricia Owens), and a Kabuki performer, Nakamura (Ricardo Montalban), and between an enlisted man serving under Gruver, Joe Kelly (Red Buttons), and his Japanese wife, Katsumi (Miyoshi Umeki).¹

Sayonara ostensibly makes a statement against racial intolerance within the context of postwar U.S.-Japanese relations. As in many Hollywood films, romance is used as a metaphor for interracial and intercultural understanding. As such, *Sayonara* is another entry in a long Hollywood tradition of social problem films that use melodrama and romance to make concrete (but also personalize, individualize, and often trivialize) broader social or political concerns.



MARLON BRANDO AND AN EXQUISITE NEW JAPANESE STAR. THEY LIVE JAMES A. MICHENER'S STORY OF DEFIANT DESIRE.

SAYONARA
THE END OF THE ROAD



FILMED IN JAPAN IN THE NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN BEAUTY OF YACHTS AND TECHNICOLOR PRESENTED BY WARNER BROS.
 PATRICIA OWENS-RED BUTTONS RICARDO MONTALBAN MARTHA SCOTT MIYOSHI UMEKI JAMES GARNER MIHKO TAKA PRODUCED BY WILLIAM GOETZ
 DIRECTED BY JOSHUA LOGAN BASED UPON THE NOVEL BY JAMES A. MICHENER SCREEN PLAY BY PAUL OSBORN

Figure 15. Hollywood sells interracial romance and the exoticism of Japan in this poster for *Sayonara* (1957). Still courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.

In fact, *Sayonara*'s message seems quite clear and its sympathetic treatment of interracial romance a move toward increased liberalization on the part of a film industry whose production code had strictly outlawed representations of miscegenation just a few years before. However, when looked at more closely, the film presents the viewer with a far more contradictory picture of race, culture, and sex than might first appear to be the case. In fact, *Sayonara* can be looked at as structured by a series of narrative transpositions that serve to obscure a good deal of the film's apparent social criticism. Through these narrative twists, the film manages to voice and then ignore ideological contradictions by transforming them into more distant but related problems. According to Roland Barthes's analysis of classical realist narratives in *S/Z*,² plots are usually driven forward by a series of such transpositions that create narrative interest, obscure ideological contradictions, and lead to an eventual narrative closure that promises to resolve both narrative and, symbolically, ideological conflicts in one movement.

Sayonara begins this narrative process with war, which stands in this film as the extreme form of cultural, national, and racial intolerance. A title reads "Korea 1951," setting the tale during the Korean War. In 1945, Korea, which had been under Japanese rule, was divided at the thirty-eighth parallel. In 1950, after the withdrawal of American troops in the south following the removal of Soviet troops in the north, North Korea, supported by the newly established People's Republic of China, crossed the dividing line in an attempt to reunify the country. UN troops, predominantly American, came to the aid of the Republic of Korea in the south. President Truman was able to manage UN involvement because the Soviets were boycotting Security Council meetings at the time. The cold war mind-set that surfaced after World War II now found expression on the battlefield. Eventually, a truce was reached under Eisenhower, and the country remains divided along the thirty-eighth parallel to this day. Controversy surrounding the war came from various sources: some thought it was illegal because no formal declaration of war ever existed; others condemned any U.S. involvement in foreign civil wars; still others thought it unwise to support the notoriously corrupt South Korean government, believing unification under the Communists to be inevitable. The U.S. Left, assailed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and all the concurrent problems associated with the cold war domestically, was, however, unable to organize any clear opposition to the war.³

Although *Sayonara* seems to ask to be read as an antiwar film, the reality of the Korean War and the controversy it generated are quickly placed on the back burner. Early in the film, Gruver, apparently disillusioned

with American involvement in Korea, mumbles that one of the pilots he shot down that day had a "face." This is the film's only real reference to the actual morality of war, and rather than take the Korean War as a historical event in its own right, the film instead chooses to quietly question war in general by allowing Gruver to comment on the humanity of his enemy.

Sayonara very quickly places the Korean War at an even greater distance in the following scene. During a medical examination a doctor announces that Gruver will be transferred to Kobe, in occupied Japan, at the request of his future father-in-law, General Webster. Leaving Korea behind, narrative interest moves to Japan, to a *postwar* setting, where issues involving war, morality, and the nature of the enemy have an even greater temporal and emotional distance. Simultaneously, the dialogue shifts from a discussion of "downing" enemy planes to romance. The doctor asks, "Wouldn't you like to tango with one of those Japanese dolls?" Instead of questioning the morality of the Korean War or exposing the conflict between conscience and duty within the military, the narrative shifts from war to romance, obscuring the issue of war in the process but still making the romantic relationships understandable only through a reference to war and racial otherness.

Later, when Gruver ruminates on the meaning of his life and career choice, the fact that he may have had a disturbed conscience on his last mission in Korea fades even further into the background. At this point, that Korean "face" comes to symbolize a very personal dissatisfaction with Gruver's agreeing to conform to his own father's expectations. (The casting of Marlon Brando as Gruver distances the issue of the morality of the Korean War even further, since Brando is often associated with young, rebellious male characters who simply cannot conform to social expectations—for example, *On the Waterfront* [1954] and *The Wild One* [1954].) Even the vaguest questioning of the morality of the Korean War becomes here simply the expression of an Oedipal dilemma, thereby personalizing antiwar sentiments as rebellions against the father more than the military establishment he represents. Attitudes toward the war become more a question of individual psychological makeup than broader moral or political concerns.

However, the Korean War is not the only "structuring absence"⁴ that kicks *Sayonara*'s plot into operation. To understand the impact the film had in 1957, it seems necessary to view the film's ideology against the backdrop of American history and the pressing social issues of the day.

By 1957, films dealing with the occupation of Japan and the aftermath of World War II already existed in fairly significant numbers. In

fact, *Sayonara* must be seen as one of many films, like *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956, which coincidentally features Brando as a comic Okinawan), *Cry for Happy* (1960), and *Japanese War Bride* (1952, discussed in the following chapter), which called for a new evaluation of America's view of Japan as an enemy nation within the framework of a story about interracial romance.

Sayonara, for example, argues that both sides suffered during the war. Pearl Harbor, Japan's expansion into Asia and the Pacific, and the massive horrors of the war fade away. However, as in its treatment of Korea, the film puts politics aside and focuses instead on the personal, for instance, on Hana Ogi's loss of her father to an American bomb. By taking its statement about peace and the horrors of war away from Korea, moreover, *Sayonara* removes one element of controversy that may have made the film less commercial. By removing some of the blame for World War II from Japan, the film can also symbolically remove some of the blame America might feel for Korea. Making war in general more problematic, the film makes Korea seem less of a fiasco.

In a similar fashion, *Sayonara* can be looked at as a veiled reminder of HUAC and its impact on Hollywood. Like *High Noon* (1952) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Sayonara* deals with the paranoia faced by insiders who suddenly find themselves on the outside. In this case, Gruver, the model officer and son of a model general, finds himself branded as a "rebel" and "troublemaker" because of his love for a Japanese woman. The thaw after Joseph McCarthy's downfall meant that this suppressed, socially critical side of Hollywood could again surface, and *Sayonara* must also be placed within this body of films.

However, although *Sayonara* begins as a statement on war, peace, and American militarism, it very rapidly shifts to the issue of race and sexuality. More than either Korea or World War II, civil rights is the issue closest to the emotional heart of *Sayonara* and, certainly, more recently on the minds of its 1957 audience. In "*The Searchers: An American Dilemma*,"⁵ Brian Henderson notes that, although John Ford's *The Searchers* deals with relations between Native Americans and white settlers, the power of the film and the problems it treats relate more to the controversy surrounding blacks and civil rights in the mid-1950s than to Native Americans and the threat of interracial sexuality in the post-Civil War era. Like *The Searchers*, *Sayonara* deals with race and sexuality at a safe remove. Like Ethan Edwards, the protagonist of *The Searchers*, Lloyd Gruver is a Southerner, a military man who represents conservative Southern values. Supposedly, both characters stand for a South in transition. However, the power of

Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, which marked an end to legal school segregation, and the increasingly visible black civil rights movement are kept out of the picture.

This preoccupation with issues of racial separation and sexuality, though perhaps oblique, actually blurs *Sayonara's* antiwar message. By dealing with race and war simultaneously, the film sidesteps any direct confrontation of either issue. Instead, it teeter-totter between both issues. War drifts even further out of the picture in a scene in which Joe Kelly and Gruver compare photographs of their fiancées. As Gruver tries to talk Kelly out of his planned marriage to a Japanese woman, race and the threat of miscegenation become the pivotal concerns.

Gruver describes his fiancée Eileen as an "American girl, with fine character, good background, good education, good family, good blood." Gruver links "blood," quality, and acceptability in his discourse, and his Southern drawl underscores the fact that race is the key element of the equation. Kelly then produces a photo of Katsumi, and even Gruver admits she is attractive. Kelly complains about racism in the military and produces several pamphlets, including "Things You Are Required to Know Before Marrying Orientals," and "But Will Your Family Accept Her?"

Certainly, a call for racial tolerance remains a central concern throughout the film; however, *Sayonara* complicates even this issue. After being chastised for threatening to give up his American citizenship to marry Katsumi, Kelly challenges Gruver's love for Eileen: "Perhaps you don't feel as strongly about your girl as I do about mine." At this point, the film twists away from the theme of racial tolerance to a questioning of gender identity and heterosexual romance. If *Sayonara* is about racial tolerance and understanding, it is also about keeping women in their "place" as wives and mothers. Rather than adhering to its initial interest in war, race, and national identity, the film takes a decidedly different turn and offers a very traditional view of femininity, masculinity, and romance as a bulwark against the other fundamental social and ideological changes alluded to within the film. Here, the conservative treatment of gender stands as a corrective to the film's more liberal treatment of race.

Romeo and Juliet in Japan: Transcendent Love and the Ideology of Romance

Any critique *Sayonara* may make of war, racism, or militarism is very firmly held in check by the film's very conservative treatment of romance. Within Western thought, from stories of courtly love during

the Middle Ages to nineteenth-century bourgeois romantic notions of love as the key to personal salvation,⁶ there has been an important link between social criticism and the dually forbidden and transcendent nature of romantic love. Standing outside laws and conventions that forbid it, romantic love acts as a corrective to social norms that are seen as restrictive, irrational, inhumane, intolerant, or hypocritical. However, even though the notion is linked to social criticism, it also quiets that criticism by placing it in the realm of individual eccentricity. Rather than calling for sweeping social change, romantic love only calls for a bit of tolerance. Further, since romantic love is so often linked to death and tragic ends of various sorts, that social critique is usually viewed as a hopeless cause even before the tale begins.

Moreover, romantic love also has its profoundly conservative side—a side keenly felt in *Sayonara*. Linked to emotion, the “natural” expression of deeply held feelings, romantic love makes a case for heterosexual coupling, and usually marriage, as the fulfillment of all desires and needs. Even more than national or racial boundaries, patriarchal ideology presents gender lines as beyond culture, “natural,” “genuine,” ahistorical, and immutable. If *Sayonara* questions national and racial boundaries on one level, it also affirms and solidifies very conservative notions of gender identity and sexuality on another.

In fact, perhaps more than anything else, *Sayonara* deals with the definition of heterosexual love and contrasts it indirectly but clearly to homosexuality, which the film presents as alluring but ultimately “unnatural” and “perverse.” *Sayonara* expresses the threat homosexuality poses to traditional, patriarchal definitions of gender in three ways: (1) through the expression of female sexuality outside the realm of male control; (2) through the questioning of the definition of masculinity and its link to war and the military; and (3) through the challenge the Japanese theatrical convention of cross-dressing poses to gender boundaries.

By introducing Gruver as a man in moral turmoil because of a barely voiced suspicion that the Korean War is unjust, *Sayonara* implicitly places Gruver’s identity as a man in crisis. Until he meets Hana Ogi, Gruver is presented as drained of power, of masculine potency. For example, the doctor finds him run-down; Kelly questions his love for Eileen; Eileen questions his lack of interest in sex; he himself questions his dedication to the military.

However, instead of openly saying that this identity crisis is linked to Gruver’s male identity and war, *Sayonara* puts the blame on women—namely, on Gruver’s fiancée Eileen. The film introduces Eileen in two photographs—one in which she is seated with her mother and the other showing her scantily clad in a bathing suit. In both, she

represents potential threats to Gruver’s sense of identity. In the first, as the “girl next door,” the proper daughter of a general, she embodies all those values that Gruver has begun to question through his own realization that the Korean War may be wrong, that is, that the enemy has a face. In the second, as the smiling bathing beauty, Eileen represents female sensuality, a sexuality that may be beyond Gruver’s power to control.

Kelly’s fiancée Katsumi, by contrast, sits passively in her photograph, wrapped demurely in a traditional kimono, smiling up at the photographer. If Eileen has the force of military tradition and the threat of female sexuality behind her, Katsumi simply represents a meek agreeability.

The differences between Katsumi and Eileen become even more striking when the two appear on screen. Eileen dresses flamboyantly in clothes that accentuate her figure. When alone with Gruver, she confronts him directly about his future plans and asks him why he is not



Figure 16. Major Lloyd Gruver (Marlon Brando) attends the wedding of enlisted man Joe Kelly (Red Buttons) to Katsumi (Miyoshi Umeki) in *Sayonara*. Still courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.

more passionate about their relationship: "Haven't you ever felt like grabbing me and hauling me off to a shack somewhere?" She also complains about Gruver's father's cool treatment of his mother, that she is kept at home, at a distance from his father's work and public life. Clearly threatened by Eileen's questions, Gruver defends traditional marriages, the military, and sexual restraint.

The scene that immediately follows features Kelly and Katsumi's wedding, with Gruver in attendance as the best man. Unable to speak English, quiet and still, Katsumi stands in marked opposition to Eileen. Gruver speaks to Katsumi quietly and slowly, as one might to a child, and, at the conclusion of the ceremony, he kisses her lightly on the mouth. Katsumi smiles and blushes. Unlike Eileen, Katsumi is not openly sexual but passive, dependent, and childlike. Gruver clearly envies Kelly his bride.

The film holds Katsumi up as a paragon of female virtue. Later, she is shown performing her domestic tasks, cooking, serving guests, bathing her husband, cheerfully and quietly. Her devotion to Kelly is all-consuming and unquestioning. At one point, Katsumi even contemplates self-mutilation, in the form of a questionable eye operation, to please her husband by "fooling" the authorities into thinking she is white. Kelly beats her for this stupid idea, exercising his control over her body and her identity. Gruver steps between them and quiets Katsumi paternalistically by telling her "not to do it again." Once again, he clearly envies Kelly his devoted wife.

If *Sayonara* calls for tolerance on the part of the viewer to accept this interracial marriage, the text also seems to be warning American women to take a lesson from Katsumi's passivity and devotion. After all, Katsumi keeps her man, while Eileen loses hers. Moreover, although *Sayonara* attempts to criticize racism, the film, as it shores up traditional gender definitions, also sticks to accepted stereotypes about Asians, particularly Asian women, as passive, childlike, and servile. Moreover, the passive Katsumi seems to act as a metaphor for the defeated Japan by reworking earlier racist stereotypes. In *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*,⁷ John W. Dover notes that the postwar pro-Japanese representations of Japan really differed little from wartime stereotypes. Rather, the same stereotypes were simply placed in a new context. For example, if Japanese childishness was seen as "irrational" and "unthinking" during the war, the same childishness meant "good little ally," "faithful imitator," and "dependent trading partner" in the postwar era.

In this case, Katsumi's passivity and dependence represent an idealized femininity. In the American popular imagination, women of color often function stereotypically as "natural" earth mothers, the embodi-

ment of a belief in a "genuine," exotic femininity beyond cultural control, something her more modern Western sisters supposedly lost by their grumblings about emancipation.

This ideologically absolute notion of femininity informs Gruver's desires and adds another complicating factor to the film. *Sayonara* may call for peace and tolerance, but it also demands the strengthening of male dominance over women. Moreover, by making the men Anglo-American and the women Japanese, the film supports America's own paternalistic attitude toward Japan. *Sayonara* seems to be saying that just as it is natural for men to love and dominate passive women, it is natural for America to take a similarly dominant posture toward Japan. Although mildly broached at the film's outset, questions surrounding both male and military prerogatives are eventually put to rest, and white, male, American hegemony is ultimately upheld.

The clearest working out of this ideological crisis of male, national, and racial boundaries comes in the narrative complication and resolution of Gruver's love affair with Hana Ogi. Structurally, the film places Hana Ogi between the active Eileen and the passive Katsumi. As the narrative unfolds, however, Hana Ogi moves away from the independence and sexual expression represented by Eileen to the more traditional, servile, domestic role represented by Katsumi. The film presents Gruver as "saving" Hana Ogi from the excesses of her own culture, which permits women in certain circumstances to live apart from and independently of men. Gruver puts her in touch with her "true" nature, that is, her desire for a "normal" domestic life and children.

Although Katsumi does represent the "ideal" woman, there is another side to *Sayonara's* vision of Japanese gender relations. If Katsumi stands for the everyday domestic aspect of Japanese sexual conventions, then Hana Ogi represents the larger-than-life theatrical world of Matsubayashi, where ordinary gender definitions do not apply in the same way, a world that is coded as "perverse." Likely based on the Takarazuka Young Girls Opera Company,⁸ Matsubayashi is a musical theater in which all the roles are played by women. Part entertainment venture, girls' school, and nunnery, the Matsubayashi parallels the U.S. military in its propensity for rule making, hierarchical relations, and a sex-segregated environment.

Hana Ogi is the star of Matsubayashi, famous for her portrayal of male roles. When Gruver first sees her, she is on her way to the theater, dressed in boyish drag, wearing knickers, a turtleneck sweater, and a felt hat with a long pheasant plume. She dramatically stands out from the other women, who are dressed in kimono-like uniforms of various colors. Her association with a transgressive but beautiful

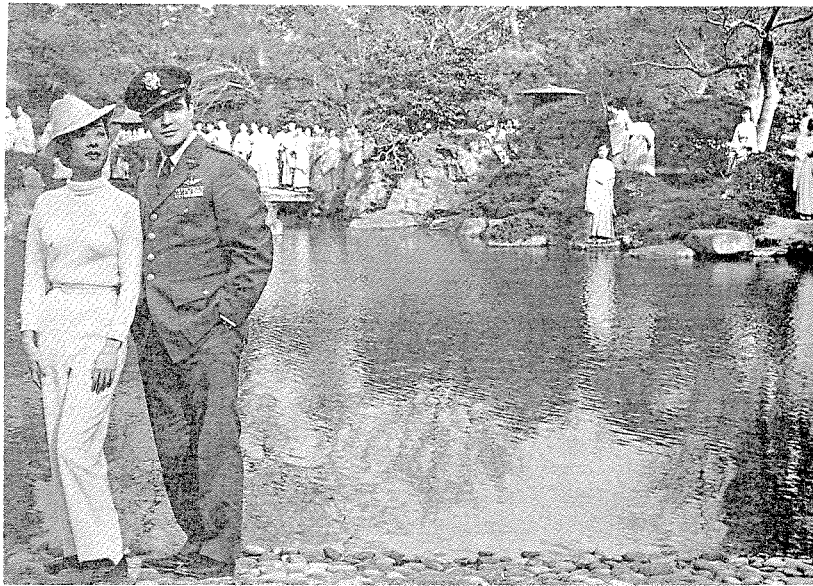


Figure 17. Gruver with Hana Ogi (Miiko Tara) in drag surrounded by other performers in the all-female musical company Matsubayashi. Still from *Sayonara* courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

androgyny is further accentuated when she is given a white cock by a fan. Gruver is mesmerized. Hana Ogi embodies the ultimate personification of forbidden love; not only is she a member of an enemy nation, a different race, and part of a theatrical troupe that absolutely forbids its members to marry or even date but she is also in drag, a male impersonator who conjures up an even more forbidden homoeroticism.

If Korea and Eileen put Gruver's masculinity in doubt, then certainly Hana Ogi adds another dimension to the depth of his rebellion against tradition and the film's own play with yet another taboo form of love. Needless to say, after putting this last possible transgression into play, *Sayonara* reverses itself. As Gruver wins Hana Ogi over from Matsubayashi, he symbolically makes her into a "woman," and she gradually puts aside her mannish attire to dress in traditional kimonos.

However, before becoming involved with Gruver, Hana Ogi represents a dream of androgyny, since she has the ability to change gender from one musical number to the next. In the first performance Gruver sees at Matsubayashi, for example, Hana Ogi appears in Western tie and tails, a Western evening dress, traditional Japanese kimonos, and

male attire from various historical periods. Within the musical spectacles, she visually transcends nation, race, and gender.

A good deal of the contradictory play of *Sayonara's* narrative revolves around the power of Hana Ogi's provocative performance and the promise Japanese theatrical traditions seem to offer, that is, the promise of a world in which cultural, racial, and gender boundaries can be toyed with and aestheticized rather than fought over and upheld through war. However, if part of the force of Gruver's attraction to Hana Ogi (and, through identification with the protagonist, the viewer's) comes from a latent homosexual desire, a wish to live in a utopian world without socially constructed and constricting laws governing race, nation, or gender, then the film allows this titillating possibility to surface only briefly.

After a sequence in which Hana Ogi, always in drag, silently rejects Gruver's advances on a daily basis, she finally agrees to meet her persistent admirer at Kelly and Katsumi's. When Gruver enters the room where she is waiting, he is dumbfounded. Kneeling at a low table, eyes downcast, dressed in a woman's kimono, Hana Ogi's gender has visibly changed. No longer coded as "male," as an androgyne, she has become a woman, and it is not surprising that this scene should mark the beginning of Gruver and Hana Ogi's love affair. Hana Ogi apologizes both for her rude behavior and for hating Americans. Here, gender change and submission to American authority coincide. Just as the woman apologizes for stepping outside her gender and snubbing the advances of a man, the nation also symbolically apologizes for what the film supposedly seeks to condemn in American society—racism and intolerance. By projecting bigotry back onto the object of prejudice, the film's critical bite softens yet again.

Conveniently, Gruver's love affair with Hana Ogi restores three important power hierarchies that the film had placed in crisis—those between the East and the West, nonwhites and whites, and women and men. It is somewhat ironic that Gruver learns racial tolerance through the sexual subjugation of a woman, who sacrifices her independence for his enlightenment. The didactic point of the narrative blurs, and the viewer may begin to wonder if by putting Hana Ogi back into her proper "place" as a woman, Gruver is not also symbolically putting the racial and national other into its "place" as subordinate to white America.

Hana Ogi performs her last musical number in the film dressed as a Japanese bride mounted on a white horse. Visually, even before Gruver appears to talk her into marriage, he has won her, "saved" her from the "perverse" celibacy and androgyny of the Matsubayashi stage. In the climactic scene that follows, Gruver tells Hana Ogi that they have

an obligation to have children, and, when, at the film's conclusion. Hana Ogi makes a statement to some reporters about her future, she reiterates this.

If at one point in *Sayonara*, the choice for Gruver seemed to be between a career and love, that choice is no longer much of an issue by the film's conclusion. General Webster has already informed Gruver of the military's plan to become more lenient toward interracial marriages. Although stigmatized by the relationship, Gruver loses less and actually regains the virility and masculinity the film had implied were in crisis at its outset. Hana Ogi, by contrast, sacrifices her career, her independence, and the free play of gender roles she represented.

Through the conservative treatment of gender, the film also silences its antiwar and antimilitary messages. The liberal promise of new laws to rectify racism and the excesses of the military is fulfilled, and the social crisis referred to at the film's beginning has been fixed without overturning the status quo. Gruver has again become a "real" man because he has saved Hana Ogi from the supposedly perverse excesses of a life without men by making her a "real" woman—a future bride and mother. The U.S. military has cleaned its house and remains intact.

The issue of the Korean War never resurfaces. The survival of Hana Ogi and Gruver's romance brings all narrative and, symbolically, social conflicts and contradictions back into balance. Narrative closure reaffirms gender, racial, and cultural norms with little variation.

Loose Ends: Subplots and Unsolved Social Conflicts

Although the social criticism promised by *Sayonara* really fizzles out in the resolution of the main plot line, the film's two principal subplots involving interracial romances remain more problematic. Kelly and Katsumi's constant harassment by racists within the military and their eventual double suicide point to a possibly more biting denunciation of American racism, military injustice, and class bias. Similarly, Eileen's relationship with Kabuki performer Nakamura indicates that the gender questioning squelched by Gruver's pursuit and conquest of Hana Ogi may not have been completely obliterated through the operation of patriarchal ideology.

The two relationships represent unanswered narrative questions. The first revolves around why Kelly and Katsumi commit suicide, while for Hana Ogi and Gruver death never comes up as a possible solution to their dilemma. The other narrative question involves whether or not Nakamura's relationship with Eileen is platonic. Through these two unresolved dilemmas, the narrative opens up a cer-

tain space for a possible ideological interrogation of class and gender shut off by the main plot.

Throughout *Sayonara*, Kelly is coded as "working class"—an Irish ethnic and an enlisted man under Gruver's command. In contrast to Kelly's working-class roots, Gruver represents the aristocratic old South, West Point, military privilege, and power. Kelly openly questions the military hierarchy and vocally criticizes its institutionalized racism. However, his criticisms are never actually articulated as "anti-military" or "antiwar." He remains personally loyal to Gruver, his immediate superior, even after Gruver rather viciously opposes Kelly's marriage, calling his fiancée a "slant-eyed runt."

As Gruver changes from a virulent bigot to a supporter of interracial romance, the military, too, symbolically cleans its house. Particularly after the tragedy of Kelly and Katsumi's deaths and an anti-American riot by Japanese who oppose Gruver's relationship with Hana Ogi, the military decides it is time to use the propaganda power of Gruver to its own advantage. It seems appropriate that Gruver and Hana Ogi's reconciliation should be celebrated in front of the Japanese and American military press outside Matsubayashi's Tokyo theater. Here, both for the stage-door fans in the fiction as well as for the spectators in the movie theater, Gruver and Hana Ogi's relationship becomes legitimate as a "news story," a spectacle that seemingly publicizes the dream of American "democracy in action" in the realm of social change.

Flamboyant and theatrical, Gruver and Hana Ogi are placed at a considerable distance from the more mundane problems facing the working-class couple, Kelly and Katsumi. Clearly, Gruver, despite his relationship with a Japanese woman, still has certain privileges that Kelly does not have—namely, money. Although never expressed as such, it is implied that Kelly and Katsumi are doomed because they simply do not have the financial resources to go against the system and live out their lives as a reproach to bigotry and racism. Gruver and Hana Ogi do have this privilege. For example, although Kelly had threatened to give up his U.S. citizenship to be with Katsumi, when the order comes for him to go back to the States, he chooses suicide rather than going AWOL or the more mundane possibility of serving out his stint in the military and returning to his wife in Japan.

The absurdity of the suicide is never voiced. Rather, in keeping with the traditions of the Western melodrama, it is simply presented as "tragic," reified as "fate." In fact, the film aestheticizes the double suicide by first introducing the idea in a Bunraku puppet performance featuring two doomed medieval lovers, the Japanese equivalents of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Katsumi and Kelly, as well as Gruver

and Hana Ogi, are in attendance. When the star-crossed lovers in the puppet drama prepare to die, Katsumi and Hana Ogi are framed in a two shot. This visually underscores the possibility that either's forbidden romance may lead to a similar end.

However, it is Katsumi who dies, not Hana Ogi. Conveniently, *Sayonara*, conservatively articulating the truism that forbidden interracial love leads to tragedy, allows the working-class couple to sacrifice themselves to make the drama of the upper-class couple more poignant. Narratively, then, the double suicide, like the Bunraku play, makes aesthetic, if not logical, sense. It also keeps in play an ideologically conservative element within a fantasy that purportedly condemns racism.

The film opens up at least two possible readings of the suicide. One favors a bourgeois, romantic interpretation that Kelly and Katsumi could not continue to live in a cold world insensitive to their love. The other reading—somewhat against the grain of a film that aestheticizes death and romance—involves looking at class differences and military injustice as the principal motive force behind the double suicide. This opens up the possibility of a more critical stance against racism and the military.

Interestingly, Katsumi's suicide also suggests a reading against the ideological grain on the question of gender roles. Although coded as "feminine" and a "good woman," Katsumi is also presented as weak and dependent in an implicitly negative way. Hana Ogi, by contrast, has been "saved" from the gender questioning her male impersonations promised, yet she is still praised for her strength, clarity of thought, and ability to survive. Whereas Katsumi has nothing without Kelly, Hana Ogi always has Matsubayashi and the power and independence of money, prestige, and a secure job. In fact, it is, ironically, because of her independence that she can survive to become Gruver's wife. Once again *Sayonara* seems to ideologically hedge its bets by explicitly condemning professional women while implicitly praising their accomplishments.

Similarly, although Eileen loses her "man" because she is not as "feminine" as Japanese women, her relationship with Nakamura opens up some potentially subversive possibilities for reading gender as something other than eternally fixed and for looking at interracial sexuality in a different light. In and of itself, any relationship between a man of color and an Anglo-Saxon woman is more threatening to the status quo than the obverse relationship. Within American popular thought, the Anglo-American female represents hearth and home, the continuation of white-defined and dominated culture. If stolen or seduced away from white men, she represents a challenge to white

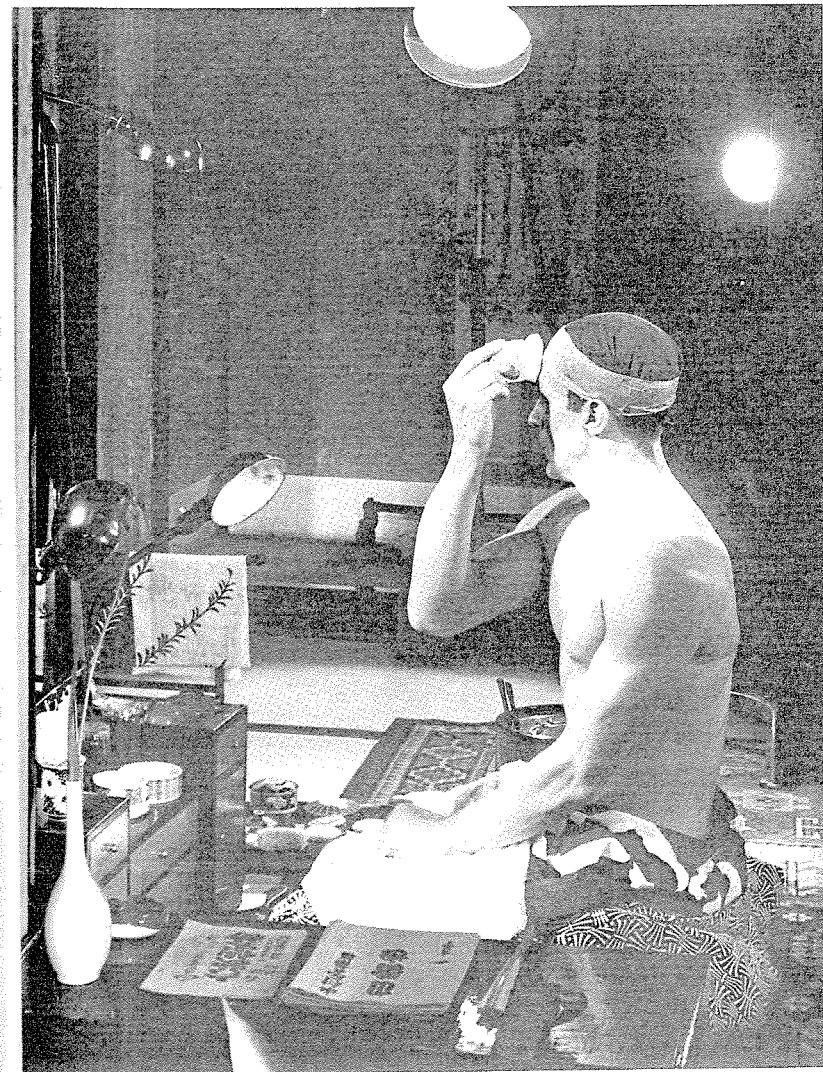


Figure 18. Nakamura (Ricardo Montalban) prepares to defy gender classifications as he applies his Kabuki makeup in *Sayonara*. Still courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

male identity and authority. Not only does she question the truism that white American culture is superior to all others, she also challenges male authority by asserting herself as a woman who chooses to look outside the confines of her own culture for sexual expression. Thus, this relationship makes problematic both the racial and gender hierarchy within American culture.

Sayonara indicates that Eileen is fascinated by Nakamura because he is a Kabuki performer, a "male actress," able to play both female and male roles. Just as Hana Ogi magically transcends gender boundaries in *Matsubayashi*, Nakamura performs with the "grace of a woman and the power of a man." He can transform himself from an elegant lady into a fierce lion spirit within a few seconds on stage. For a woman like Eileen, who is openly critical of the traditional wifely role (although she is critical of it for being "unromantic," and she states that she wants to live "body and soul" with and for her man), this free play of gender roles has a very special appeal.

However, *Sayonara* keeps this couple at a distance from one another as well as the viewer. Although clearly enamored of Nakamura, Eileen takes every opportunity to proclaim her love for Gruver. Moreover, in the only scene in which Eileen and Nakamura are actually alone together, the series of close-ups used to present their dialogue visually keeps them separated. The possible increased intimacy of a two shot is avoided. Both Nakamura and Eileen look off-screen away from one another as Nakamura, in a contradictory gesture, discusses Eileen's beauty while claiming "not necessarily" to be making love to her. Eileen abstractly replies that she needs to learn much more about Japan and everything else. Whether this implies that Nakamura will teach her about sex as well as Kabuki and cherry blossoms is left to the viewer's imagination. Since this scene is the last in which the two actually appear together, the nature of their relationship remains obscure. Certainly, too, the fact that Nakamura's part is played by a Latin (Ricardo Montalban), rather than an Asian, actor further removes the threatening racial aspect of the fantasy, while keeping a certain exoticism at its core.

Despite this, the fact that a romance between Nakamura and Eileen is even hinted at opens up the possibility of another reading of the strictly conservative rendering of gender roles that the film features in its main plot. By choosing a relationship with a man of another race and an "enemy" nation, Eileen asserts her autonomy in a way that Gruver could never accept. Moreover, the free gender movement and sensuality that the Kabuki theater promises also allow for the potentially disruptive expression of female desire. All these possibilities, however, are only hinted at and then dropped, while *Sayonara* remains quite conservative in its treatment of both gender and class differences.

In fact, romance makes *Sayonara* a profoundly conservative film despite its seemingly genuine plea for peace and racial tolerance. Moving from war to race and subsuming both within the sexist ideology of romantic love weds a call for change to the reaffirmation of male—and, by implication, American—domination of the racially, ethnically, and sexually other.

Although ostensibly a critique of racism sugarcoated by a Romeo and Juliet love story, *Sayonara*, more profoundly perhaps, exists as a historical document that illustrates how the dominant ideology deals with social and cultural change by both acknowledging and squelching it. Although the film implies that Gruver and Hana Ogi ultimately live happily ever after as husband and wife, the rumblings of class and gender inequalities heard within the film's subplots do not seem to be wrapped up as neatly.

In fact, the rambling, contradictory sweep of such melodramas as *Sayonara* helps to explain the staying power of this particular genre. There is something for everyone. Gender play and female autonomy exist for women who had recently tasted other roles during World War II, only to have those alternatives taken away after the war by the reassertion of male privilege and the ideology of heterosexual romance. Racial tolerance and the promise of America's peaceful intentions vis-à-vis the rest of the world are there for the nonwhite and non-American viewer. Working-class issues are also voiced for the majority of viewers who may not identify completely with the film's principal bourgeois couple. All these possibilities, however, are checked by *Sayonara*'s ultimate rationalization of white, male, bourgeois privilege and power.

The "B" Version: Interracial Sexuality and Cold War Politics in *The Crimson Kimono*

The B-movie has traditionally filled a number of social and economic functions in the American cinema. Reaching their peak during the Depression when low-budget short features or serial dramas served as the second feature of a longer program, B-movies were designed as an added value to draw in financially strapped viewers. One type of B-movie, the "exploitation film," survived the decline of the double bill after World War II, when serials and other B-movie fare began to die out. Because of limited budgets and lowered aesthetic expectations, exploitation films have always been somewhat freer to explore issues that might shock a general audience and reduce revenues. Drug addiction, prostitution, transvestism, physical deformities, bigamy, and juvenile delinquency all promise to give the exploitation-film audience

a voyeuristic pleasure in seeing the forbidden as well as a sense of moral, intellectual, or physical superiority.

Many of these low-budget films, using the hurried nature of their production to best advantage, are able to be topical in a way more carefully planned and laboriously produced films cannot. Also, as studio costs increased and the exploitation films moved out onto actual locations, the hand-held cameras, grainy film stock, and spontaneous feel began to give these films an additional gritty, journalistic edge. In many, a tension can be felt between this almost documentary-like topicality and the exaggerated histrionics of acting styles and melodramatic flourishes.

Marginalized by the preponderance of large-budget productions in Hollywood, the topics of racism and race relations always provided the exploitation market with appropriately provocative subject matter. Particularly in the post-World War II era, when the decay of the studio system and the death of the production code meant that even "prestige" pictures needed to test new ground to compete with television, the exploitation film had to become more excessive to turn a profit. Many big-budget features like *Sayonara*, *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, *The Searchers*, and *Imitation of Life* had already tested the taboos against miscegenation by the end of the 1950s, challenging the exploitation film to go a step further.

Samuel Fuller, for example, became famous for his low-budget meditations on race and racism in America. *The Crimson Kimono* (1959) represents only one of Fuller's B-movie treatments of this issue. (Fuller's *China Gate*, analyzed in chapter 5, provides another example of his treatment of racism in American culture.) Virulently anti-Communist, Fuller was able to use the exploitation film to picture America as a society striving for equality within its own ranks as it also waged a cold war against the Eastern Bloc and its allies. Since he wrote, directed, and produced many of his own films (including, in this case, *The Crimson Kimono*), Fuller had the freedom to return time and again to issues of international politics and domestic civil rights as long as his films turned a profit.

Within his oeuvre, Fuller employed several different narrative strategies to attempt to reconcile the contradiction between American domestic racism and the United States' moral right to wage war in Germany to vanquish fascism and in Korea and Indochina to eliminate communism. Although the fellowship of the all-male military group provided one way for him to explore this issue dramatically, Fuller also used romance to depict the interpersonal dynamics of racism.

In *The Crimson Kimono*, for example, two Korean War veterans turned homicide detectives, Joe Kojaku (James Shigeta) and Charlie

Bancroft (Glenn Corbett), fall in love with the same woman, Chris Downes (Victoria Shaw). All three are thrown together during a murder investigation. Although attracted to Charlie at first, Chris soon discovers she is in love with Joe. Loyal to his friend Charlie, Joe tries to repress his feelings, but eventually they explode violently. As he confesses his love for Chris, Joe claims to detect a racist look on Charlie's face, which sparks an identity crisis for Joe that drives him away from Chris. Eventually, Joe admits that his charges of racism were unfounded, and although he only partially reconciles with Charlie, he is able to freely embrace Chris and kiss her at the film's conclusion.

Although not as provocative as a kiss would likely have been between a black actor and a white leading lady in 1959, this kiss between an Asian male character (actually played by a Japanese-American actor) and a Caucasian woman still tested the boundaries of what could or could not be depicted within the commercial cinema. The film plays with character types and viewer expectations springing from a history of Hollywood's villainous mandarins and "yellow peril" barbarians. However, although this kiss challenged racist attitudes to a degree, it did so at the expense of silencing any genuine interrogation of racism by making racial barriers a question of Joe's paranoid delusions.

Like most Hollywood narratives, *The Crimson Kimono* is a highly contradictory discourse that offers viewers a number of interpretive positions. The film attempts to balance an image of America as a melting pot, morally and culturally equipped to defend freedom abroad, with a view of America as an unequal society divided within. This uneasy balance is achieved through a narrative that upholds gender inequality by killing off, jailing, or domesticating virtually all signs of female independence, by denying that racism exists anywhere except in the deluded minds of its victims, and by holding the American military up as an exemplary champion of human rights. Thus, like *Sayonara*, it uses its parallel love stories to broach and then eliminate the ideological challenges interracial love affairs pose to the racial status quo.

High Art, Low Art, and the Domestication of the Exotic

Part of the way in which *The Crimson Kimono* keeps this ideological play in operation is by linking issues of race, exclusionism, and assimilation to questions of exoticism, sexuality, and aesthetics. Battles are played out between the sexes, between high art and low art, and between the superficial, decorative differences associated with ethnic otherness and actual cultural distinctions. In fact, the issue of racial difference surfaces rather late in the film, almost as an afterthought.

As the credits roll, the painting of the kimono of the film's title gradually emerges from a pencil sketch to its completed form. Although the painting itself is representational, it is shown on an easel, with brushes and paints next to it, with more abstract, Cubist-influenced paintings in the background. A brush appears in frame and signs the painting "Chris."

The scene changes from this decidedly "high" art world of academic painting to the "low" art milieu of a Los Angeles burlesque theater, where the striptease artist Sugar Torch (Gloria Pall) is performing. After her act, she goes backstage and is shot by an unidentified figure dressed in a fedora and trench coat. She runs out onto the boulevard and collapses dead in the middle of the street.

In these two opening scenes, *The Crimson Kimono* sets into operation its major narrative questions: Who is Chris? Who killed Sugar Torch? What is the relationship between the two? Or, put another way, what is the relationship between high art and striptease, between the B-movie world of the crime thriller and the art academy? How are all these questions related to the convergence of the Japanese exoticism of the kimono and the vulgar eroticism of Sugar Torch's blond wig and stripper's spangles? What is the relationship between the painter's voyeurism in the service of art, the spectator's enjoyment of the striptease, and the mystery of death and sexual allure? The mysteries associated in the Western patriarchal imagination with Asia, the female body, the nature of artistic genius, and the ultimate inscrutability of death all merge in these two opening scenes to set the stage for the complex unraveling of what, on the level of pure plot, is a very formulaic *policier*.

The close-up of Detective Joe Kojaku's face at the beginning of the film's third scene seems to offer some hope for the resolution of the contradictory images of demure kimono-clad beauty and brazen stripper. When it becomes clear that the figure in the portrait is none other than Sugar Torch, the question is immediately raised, Did she have a Japanese boyfriend?—offering an interracial love affair gone sour as the solution to the murder and the mystery of a blond geisha.

However, it soon becomes apparent that Sugar Torch transgressed aesthetic rather than racial divisions. Her search for a new striptease act rather than for romance—interracial or otherwise—led to death. Ironically, it is the Japanese policeman who is drawn into an interracial love affair rather than the dead woman whom he suspects is involved in one. A dressing room filled with sketches of Japanese martial arts and traditional Japanese gowns and coiffures point to a desire on Sugar Torch's part to use the aesthetic qualities of Japanese culture to transcend the "low" art world of burlesque, that is, to rise above herself in terms of taste and class. It is this transgression that proves fatal.

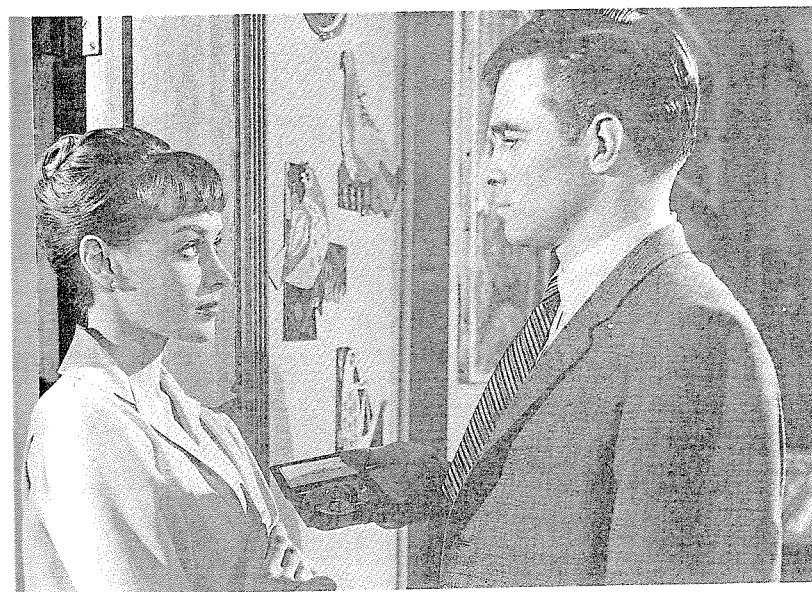


Figure 19. The working-class cop Charlie Bancroft (Glenn Corbett) meets the polished artist Chris Downes (Victoria Shaw) in *The Crimson Kimono* (1959). Still courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.

Given the markedly "low" art qualities of the B-movie category to which *The Crimson Kimono* belongs, it is interesting that this low art/high art tension should be so important to the narrative. With really only one exception, all the major characters in the film fit into one category or another, with the B-movie viewer placed squarely in the low-art camp. High-art highbrows (including the interracial lovers, Joe and Chris) remain outside their ken, speaking in a language that the film seems to maintain is beyond their innate ability to comprehend.

The jilted Charlie functions as the principal lowbrow point of identification. Whereas Joe plays piano, appreciates painting, speaks Japanese, and understands both Western and Japanese aesthetics, Charlie is more interested in Chris's face and figure than in her artwork and, admittedly, knows little about art beyond martial artistry. When duty calls, Joe finds his investigations leading him to convents and Buddhist shrines, while Charlie's sleuthing always seems to return him to skid row bars, cheap hotels, and the company of sleazy informants.

In fact, Charlie goes to skid row to seek the help of the one character who has the ability to mediate the high-art and low-art domains carved out in the film. To solve the first mystery of the identity of the artist Chris, Charlie turns to Mac (Anna Lee), an alcoholic skid row

muralist. In fact, if Charlie stands in as the average B-movie viewer, more at home in a bar than in an art gallery, then a case can be made that Mac occupies a special position in the narrative since she can navigate between the high-art world of opera and painting and the low-art world of strippers and B-movies. Nicholas Garnham, in his study of Fuller's films, makes the following observation about Mac:

Her art is equated with Fuller's. They both share the same setting and the same concerns. Mac . . . is an informer. She reveals truths. This she can only do because she is fully involved with the seamy side of life. She rightly diagnoses the weakness of Chris's art as due to lack of experience.⁹

A drunken eccentric who may be either a genius or a bum, Mac poses no threat to the B-moviegoers' taste and sensibility. As such, she can mediate between Charlie's inability to understand why Chris loves Joe and the film's demand that the interracial romance be looked at as proper, natural, and genuine. By simply accepting Chris's statement, "I love Joe Kojaku," without questioning the attraction, Mac allows the viewer to read the relationship as the meeting of like-minded peo-

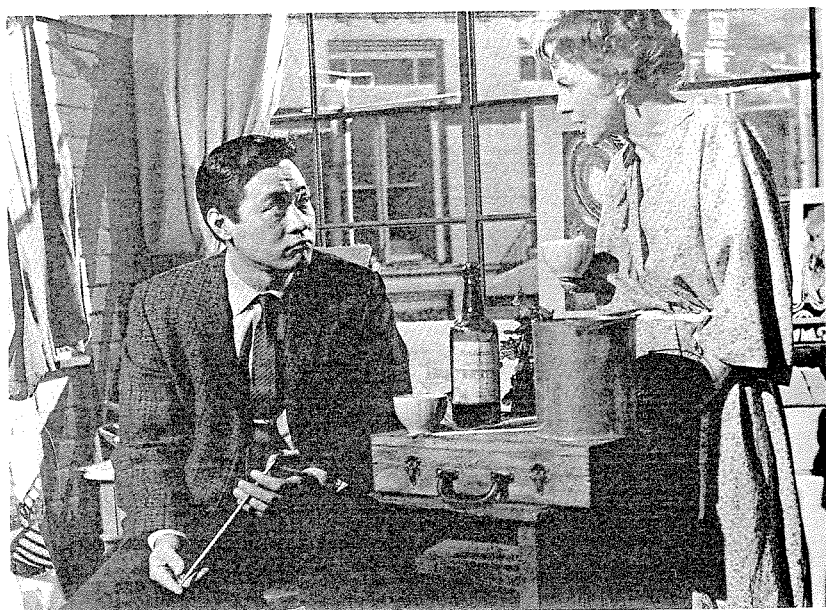


Figure 20. Mac (Anna Lee) bridges the gap between high and low art. Here she lectures Joe. Still from *The Crimson Kimono* courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.

ple, artistic eccentrics who could only be understood by "one of their own"—someone like Mac. In this way, Mac allows the film to mask the issue of race by using a discourse involving aesthetics.

In order for the film to maintain an ideological equilibrium that will neither allow for an expressed racism nor a radical call for complete desegregation, this displacement of racial onto aesthetic concerns becomes crucial. When looked at in terms of race, Chris's choice of a Japanese lover could radically disturb the status quo. If, on the one hand, Chris must turn to a Japanese man for romance, the implication is that Caucasian men are somehow inadequate. If, on the other hand, Chris turns to Joe because of his artistic sensitivity, because he represents a high-art aesthetic sensibility, this may not upset the B-movie viewers who likely place both Joe and Chris at a distance from themselves. After all, Joe and Chris are "highbrows"—eccentric, incomprehensible, elitist, and outside the quotidian rules that govern the rest of society.

The dialogue in the scene in which Joe and Chris first discover their love for each other helps to underscore this reading of their relationship. After playing the piano (with a bust of Beethoven prominent-



Figure 21. Romance and high art aesthetics come together in front of a bust of Beethoven as Chris and Joe Kojaku (James Shigeta) discover their mutual attraction. Still from *The Crimson Kimono* courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

ly displayed to assure Joe's high-art qualifications) and a discussion of Joe's artistic father, both Joe and Chris end up sitting close together on the sofa. While fondling a small Japanese martial arts statue, Joe begins to discuss Chris's art with enigmatic phrases like "It's unfinished." "It's as if you were sitting on the edge of a volcano," "It's as if you were hunting for something." After Chris calls Joe a "sensitive critic," the conversation switches to love. The couple gets up from the sofa. Joe moves behind Chris, touches her, but then moves off to sit at the piano. The scene ends with Joe playing moodily; his face darkened and obscured by the webbed music stand on the piano which acts as a frame within the frame. Both aesthetics and sexual attraction across racial lines remain incomprehensible, available only to the "sensitive," to the initiated, to the realm of high art beyond the average viewer's ken.

This call to look at Joe's and Chris's relationship as a romance between two kindred souls rather than as a romance between a Japanese man and an Anglo-American woman also brings to the surface further challenges to the American social order that must somehow be dealt with or suppressed. Chris's choice of Joe over Charlie unleashes the possibility of female self-determination, a female independence that the film struggles on several levels to contain.

In fact, in *The Crimson Kimono*, the potential threats posed by sexual and racial differences to a vision of America as the melting pot, as free, equal, and just for all its citizens, are linked together and dealt with through domestication and denial. The exoticism and sexual allure of the painting of Sugar Torch in a Japanese kimono threaten the image the rest of the film tries to maintain of Los Angeles' Little Tokyo and its inhabitants as completely assimilated, patriotic, and content with an American identity. *The Crimson Kimono* both recognizes a certain voyeuristic fascination with this Japanese otherness and tries to deny that fascination by literally domesticating the Japanese.

Joe and Charlie's apartment bears witness to this domestication. Iconographically, it is a meeting ground of East and West with a bust of Beethoven on the piano and Japanese lacquers and prints on the walls. Any threat racial or cultural differences may pose is symbolically miniaturized in the collection of Japanese dolls on display behind the sofa. Joe, too, has been domesticated. No tension exists in his relationship with Charlie. At the beginning of the film, he and Charlie live together in absolute harmony. Joe is apparently completely assimilated—complaining of his inability to communicate with girls raised in Japan, speaking unaccented English, unquestioningly working for a police force that monitors his community. He represents the charm of Little Tokyo, where chopsticks are used in the local diner and little girls dressed in kimonos march to American brass bands.

Even Joe's relationship with Charlie fits into a long tradition of close friendships between Anglo-American and nonwhite men. He is like the Lone Ranger's Tonto or the Green Hornet's Kato, an unthreatening, domesticated, emasculated, and completely loyal companion. However, Joe's relationship with Chris threatens this domestic harmony. In a complex way, the love affair threatens on two fronts. First, it unleashes the demon of racial difference, which is violently played out during a *kendo* (Japanese sword) match when Joe throws out all the rules and beats Charlie unconscious. If Japanese culture appeared as generally unthreatening before this scene, the violence and potential destructive power of this alien culture erupt as Charlie is literally beaten senseless at a Japanese game he assumed he played well. That he has no clue about what may be going on in his best friend's head shows that the American melting pot can boil over unexpectedly.

Second, Joe's and Chris's love affair represents a strong challenge to 1950s American manhood. Assailed by the emergence of women during World War II as significant members of the labor force, American masculine identity was shored up by all sorts of undisguised propaganda glorifying housework and idealizing the suburban home as the pinnacle of female bliss. That Chris should prefer the "sensitive" and exotic Joe to the down-to-earth, blue-collar Charlie raises the issue of what type of masculinity could emerge out of this postwar identity crisis. Suffice it to say that it is crucial that someone should end up at the conclusion of *The Crimson Kimono* embracing Chris. She must be domesticated to remove the threat of the independent career woman and to silence any possibility that the homoerotic bond between the roommates Joe and Charlie could prove stronger than the Hollywood ideal of heterosexual romance.

In fact, any gender transgression the sensitive Japanese male may represent is displaced onto the female characters in the film. The women in *The Crimson Kimono* are not only undomesticated but they are literally dangerous and certainly a threat to men as well as to other women. If Joe represents an unvoiced homoeroticism and Chris a potentially castrating independence, then the solution to the murder mystery and the reunion of Chris and Joe as a heterosexual couple at the end of the film quells sexual tensions.

In many ways, in fact, gender difference is presented in *The Crimson Kimono* as a greater threat to the social order than racial or ethnic differences. However, while race and racism are openly addressed as issues, gender and sexism remain unvoiced but insistent topics throughout the film. Virtually all the women in *The Crimson Kimono* transgress gender boundaries and engage in behavior considered unacceptable within a male-defined and male-dominated society. Parallel

love triangles provide the film with its narrative structure, and, in each triangular relationship, a woman is positioned as a source of danger, mystery, and narrative disequilibrium.

The first love triangle is the fiction-within-the-fiction of Sugar Torch's Japanese-inspired striptease. Sugar plays a geisha who arouses a karate expert (*karateka*). When the geisha's boyfriend, a samurai swordsman, arrives, the *karateka* and he duel. The *karateka* defeats the swordsman and kills the geisha, as she weeps over her lover's dead body. The cynical theater manager who tells the story to Joe and Charlie adds that the dead lovers provide a "Romeo and Juliet touch."

In *Underworld USA*, Colin McArthur observes that *The Crimson Kimono* has an "almost Shakespearean symmetry."¹⁰ The two other principal love triangles in the film echo Sugar Torch's proposed kimono act. While Joe and Charlie battle over Chris, the murder investigation reveals another love triangle involving Sugar Torch, the chief suspect, Hansel (Neyle Morrow), and his girlfriend, Roma Wilson (Jaclyne Greene). Hansel, a librarian specializing in Asia, whose real name is Paul Sand, and Roma, a Caucasian woman who makes Japanese wigs, seem an unlikely duo to be involved in the murder of a stripper. As in Sugar Torch's act, female sexuality and jealousy lead to murder when Roma mistakes the relationship between her boyfriend and the stripper as a love affair rather than a business deal.

Roma's misunderstanding of Hansel's relationship with Sugar Torch parallels Joe's misinterpretation of Charlie's questioning of his proposed marriage to Chris as racism. Because of this suspicion of racism, Joe not only moves out on Charlie but also breaks his engagement with Chris, resigns from the police force, and goes to Little Tokyo to sulk. Only when Roma, shot in the back by Joe and bleeding in his arms, confesses that she had let her jealous imagination run away with her when she murdered Sugar Torch, does Joe admit his mistake. He apologizes to Charlie. Finally, Joe is brought back into mainstream white society when he kisses Chris. Ironically, this happy ending is accomplished by his identification with a murderess whom he has shot and arrested. Even if his relationship with Charlie remains somewhat unresolved, any question of his gender identity is quieted when he uses his male police prerogative to shoot Roma and his simple prerogative as a man to kiss Chris. If either Roma's or Chris's sexuality or fascination with Japanese culture or transgression of any other racial or gender boundaries proved threatening in any way, that threat is obliterated by the working out of the film's denouement. Not only is Joe redomesticated by his acceptance of mainstream American society but he is also firmly placed within the patriarchal domestic order with his woman in his arms.

Joe's reintegration into the melting pot is not the only domestication that takes place, however. Women are also controlled and brought back to patriarchal society. Roma is brought into police custody, and Chris is wrapped in the protective arms of her fiancé. Their independence and dangerous sexual expression (even Chris is associated with the power to destroy intimate bonds and provoke violence) has been curtailed. Sugar Torch's transgression of gender, cultural, and class boundaries in her pursuit of a high-art dream of a "tasteful" Japanese striptease has been shattered, and her death has been explained away, soon to be forgotten.

Even Mac, who figures in a love triangle hinted at but suppressed in the film, which involves Chris, Charlie, and herself, ends up in a two shot with Charlie at the end of the film. Throughout *The Crimson Kimono*, Mac and Charlie, despite the differences in their ages, which would belie any romantic involvement, engage in all sorts of suggestive bits of business (Mac drunkenly falls into Charlie's arms) and exchanges of dialogue (Mac, drunkenly, and Charlie, sleepily, both say, "I love you," supposedly joking). If Chris and Joe's kiss represents racial harmony, the triumph of romantic love, the celebration of heterosexuality, then Mac and Charlie's two shot and comic exchange symbolically reconcile low-art taste with high-art pretensions. An element of cynicism or irony is added. Identifying perhaps more with Mac and Charlie, as a comic couple, than with the seriously romantic Joe and Chris, viewers can appreciate Joe and Chris at a distance, as part of the spectacle of Little Tokyo, which may or may not have any bearing on relationships in the quotidian world of the B-moviegoer.

"You Only See What You Want to See": Race, National Identity, and the Suppression of History

The Crimson Kimono's happy ending rings somewhat false with viewers who know for a fact that racism is more than the paranoid delusions of nonwhites. To better understand ideological operations involved in this denial of racism, a closer examination of those things left out of the narrative or put at the margins within the film as ancillary moments of pure spectacle may prove useful.

At one point in *The Crimson Kimono*, Joe must meet with one of his informants at a cemetery. Before this meeting takes place, however, the plot comes to a halt. The camera lingers over several shots of a memorial to Nisei soldiers, who died in Europe during World War II, including shots of statements of commendation by Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and Mark W. Clark. Eventually, the camera

pulls back to reveal Joe's informant tending the grave of his son, who died in the Korean War in 1950.

These memorials to World War II and the Korean War dead from the Japanese community, as well as Joe's military service during the Korean War, stand as unquestioned and unquestionable symbols of America's ability to assimilate the racially and ethnically different in wartime. The film also justifies American foreign campaigns because of this internal championing of democracy and justice. Nowhere is any mention made of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. *The Crimson Kimono* remains silent about the fact that the federal government, because of a racist paranoia about the Japanese community during the war, imprisoned not only naturalized citizens but also second-generation Nisei born in the United States and all others of Japanese ancestry in the western United States. This internment, which did not affect Americans of German or Italian origin, virtually wiped out the Japanese community in California. Even after the war, with homes, farms, and businesses confiscated, the Japanese community in Los Angeles could never be the same. Both the bustling world of *The Crimson Kimono's* Little Tokyo and the inclusion of this memorial to the Nisei who fought in Europe hide the real American racism that sent Japanese Americans to concentration camps.¹¹

If Japanese Americans were willing, if unable (the government forbade the stationing of Nisei troops in the Pacific), to fight the Japanese during World War II, then Korea becomes particularly significant as a symbol of Japanese Americans' loyalty to a white-defined American identity. No mention is made of the fact that the Korean War saw the first integrated American troops ever in U.S. history. Rather, Joe's informant's pride springs from having had his son die in Korea. This pride is underscored by the inclusion of a narratively unmotivated but ideologically charged scene in which the workings of the plot halt and the informant attends a Buddhist ceremony, conducted in Japanese, to commemorate his son's death. Joe waits impatiently outside the temple while this takes place. Only when it is over and the point is emphatically made that Asian Americans are as patriotic as anyone else can the plot again move into gear.

The Crimson Kimono's use of a racially integrated American military force in Korea to prove that racism is a dead issue in American society again surfaces in another scene that makes little narrative sense. The murder investigation leads Charlie and Joe to the karate expert Sugar Torch wanted for her show, a Korean man named Shuto (Fuji), who has recently moved to Little Tokyo. When Joe tries to question him, he runs off. Later, Joe finds Shuto in a pool hall and calls in Charlie to help him subdue the gigantic karateka. Using both

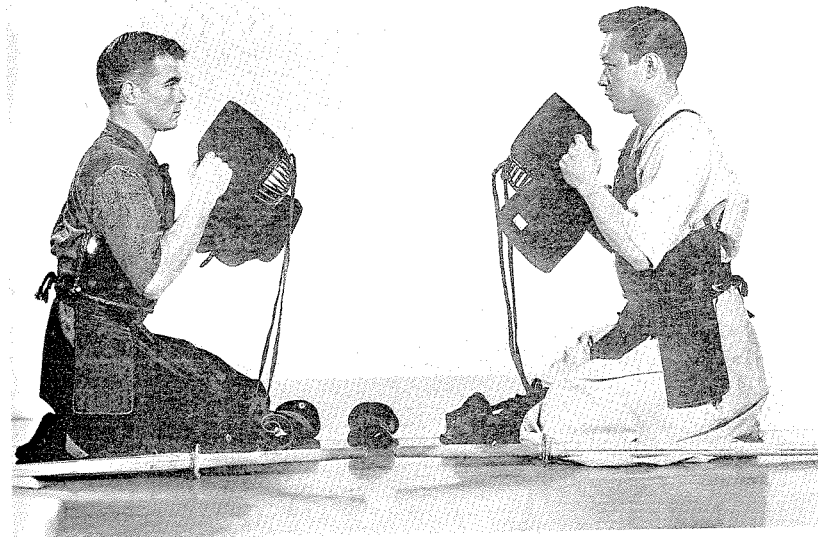


Figure 22. Joe and Charlie prepare for their kendo match. Still from *The Crimson Kimono* courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

karate and Western boxing techniques, Joe and Charlie manage to take in Shuto. For the detectives, who met "in a foxhole" in Korea, this scene, which does little to further the narrative, serves as a replay of their military experience. Joe and Charlie, the Nisei and the Anglo-American, fight together to subdue the Asian antagonist, proving Joe's loyalty to America over Asia and confirming America's moral right to fight any perceived Asian threat. The multicultural blend of fighting techniques ideologically affirms the power of American culture to assimilate the foreign and, thereby, strengthen itself.

In a similar way, Joe's kendo match with Charlie momentarily halts the narrative. This enables the ritual display of the kendo competitors' march into the Little Tokyo gymnasium and the exoticism of their preparations for the match to be savored visually. Only the cold exchange of glances between Joe and Charlie before they mask themselves for the duel sets the narrative back in motion, presaging the explosion of Joe's unchecked anger.

This kendo match marks a particularly contradictory moment in the film. In this scene, Joe, the winner in the love triangle, vents his supposedly unjustified anger on the innocent Charlie. It is a moment when Joe, excused by the eruption of his emotions, displays his superior swordsmanship, even if it is by breaking the rules. Up to this point, Joe has been the model cop and ideal best friend, even trying to set

aside his love for Chris for Charlie's sake; however, as Joe beats Charlie to the ground, a potentially racist fear of the Japanese as vicious and incomprehensible surfaces. Although this reading is held in check by the inclusion of several close-ups of Japanese spectators condemning Joe's behavior, thereby separating him from the community, reading the battle as a struggle between a Nisei and an Anglo-American is certainly possible.

Thus, although Joe's accusation of Charlie's racism comes after the fight, it seems to have been simmering under the surface long before. Charlie, hearing that Joe loves Chris, asks, "You mean you want to marry her?" Without any thought, Joe labels the remark as racist: "You wouldn't have said it that way if I were white." A new narrative theme, overshadowing both the murder mystery and the romance, arises: Is Charlie a racist or simply an angry, spurned lover? Is Joe a victim of racism or paranoid?

Having already established Joe as a bit off during the kendo match, the film uses every means at its disposal to guide the viewer to interpret Charlie's remark as personal anger rather than racial bigotry. Joe, in effect, becomes the "bad guy" in need of a moral education.

Later, Joe explains to Chris his interpretation of Charlie's look and remark as racist:

I saw that look, Chris. It's a look I've never seen before in his face or anybody else's. I'm no wet nose. Nothing like that should hit me below the belt. . . . Take a good look, Chris. Do I look different today than I did yesterday? Did my face change? I never felt this way in the army, in the police. . . . Maybe it's five thousand years of blood behind me bursting to the front. For the first time, I feel different. I taste it right through every bone inside of me. For the first time, I catch myself trying to figure out who I am. I was born here. I'm American. I feel it, live it, and love it. But, down deep, who am I? Japanese American? American Japanese? Nisei? What label do I live under, Chris? You tell me.

That a Japanese American man, in his twenties or early thirties, who must have grown up during World War II, with virulently racist anti-Japanese sentiments common throughout the United States, should be given a speech in which he claims to have never experienced racism before seems ludicrous. That a Nisei involved in an interracial love affair should have a genuine identity crisis and feelings of apprehension because of a personal history of racism (likely including internment) makes quite a bit of sense. This possibility is completely suppressed, however. The film musters all the representatives of reason and rationality it can, including Charlie, Chris, and Mac, to highlight the interpretation that Charlie's look came from "normal, healthy, jealous

hate," as he claims. Isolated and presented as crazy, Joe finally comes to his senses when Roma confesses in his arms, but nagging doubts remain. If racism is all in Joe's imagination, why does Charlie accuse Chris of saying "something" that upset Joe when he first notices a change in Joe's behavior? If the possibility that Chris could make a racist remark comes to his mind, why should Joe be presented as paranoid when he interprets Charlie's look and remark as racist?

Despite Joe's acceptance of and reintegration into American society, which is sealed with a kiss, *The Crimson Kimono's* denial of racism must perplex some viewers as much as the interracial kiss would provoke others. Narrative closure cannot give the final word on the social contradictions the film voices and denies. *The Crimson Kimono* really cannot be taken seriously as the daring antiracist statement promised by that kiss, since it also so vehemently demands that the racism it combats is all an illusion. In typical B-movie fashion, *The Crimson Kimono* promises transgression but delivers merely titillation and exploitation.