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| Perception of Youth Through Cultural Values |
| Japanese and American Films from the Early 2000’s |
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| Addie Gingold |
| JAPN 310: Japanese Cinema |

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**INTRODUCTION**

Film has the potential to project the behaviors of society to a global audience. In particular, cultural values are often portrayed through the actions of the younger generations. In response to Timothy Shary’s *Youth Culture in Global Cinema,* older generations have no interest in how youth is perceived in film (Shary, 2007). While this may be true, I find that adults should be concerned with these perceptions, because they’re likely to be affected by the changing attitudes of the youths around them. Film carries strong influences for the younger generation, as it defines the behaviors of both mainstream and counter cultures.

However, without acknowledging the general age of the audience, cinema still “explores what it means to look at young people and what cultural baggage their bodies have been asked to carry (Scahill, 2008).” From an international viewer’s point of view, observing these perceptions of a culture’s youth can be a constructive window into a nation’s typical values, behaviors, and social structures.

**Thesis Statement**

Regardless of country of origin, films often focus on the culture’s youth and how they interact within society. However, my generation was influenced by a wide variety of visual media from various cultures. I will analyze how the target culture’s values are displayed in film, primarily how it represents its younger generations, as seen in Japan’s *Kamikaze Girls* by Tetsuya Nakashima, Mamoru Hosoda’s *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* and *Summer Wars,* as well as references to American films produced in the early 2000’s. In this paper, I’d like to focus on how Japanese films and animations perceive youth culture compared to their Western counterparts, and how these perceptions can influence young viewers; in particular, the strengths of a group versus the individual, social hierarchy, and the values of self-expression.

**THE GROUP VERSUS THE INDIVIDUAL**

A major difference between Japanese and Western culture is the emphasis put on functioning in a group as opposed to the worth of the individual. In Japan, it’s generally more important to act in a way that benefits others. However, I’ve noticed that this idea of communalism isn’t necessarily shown in all Japanese films.

**“The Girl Who Leapt Through Time”**

Mamoru Hosoda’s *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* focuses more on the struggles of the individual. Despite the movie being animated, the more mature themes of loneliness and working for the benefit of others are not muddled at all. Audiences are able to observe the pressures put on students regarding their futures. Although the focus is on time travel, it doesn’t have the same plot as others with the same motif. Time travel starts as a way of being selfish, but eventually becomes a means of helping others.

This film displays Japanese youth in a way that suggests subtle changes within the culture in the new generation. Hosoda’s heroine initially acts in ways that only benefit her, but throughout the story, she realizes that her abilities should be aimed towards helping those around her. In my opinion, I think that portraying youth in this way is a reflection of the steady influence of Western culture on Japanese students.

**Western Films and the Individual**

Like *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time,* American films produced in the 2000’s follow a similar progression for character development. Although young, characters are portrayed as inexperienced, yet independent. Parental figures are mentioned only as a fragment of the entire story, but the young protagonists rarely depend on them for guidance. By doing so, young viewers are more likely to emulate the actions of their favorite characters, and pursue independence. It also follows the Western idea that in order to achieve what you want, you need to be self-motivated.

**INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILY**

Although my focus is on the perceptions of Japanese and American youth, how this generation interacts with family in film projects a culture’s general values as well, which ultimately affects the behaviors of young viewers. Interpreting how respect functions within society can both reflect current practices, and inspire positive change.

**“Summer Wars”**

*Summer Wars* features an entire family working together the achieve victory, and ultimately save the technological world. It incorporates aspects of the traditional family dynamic, as seen through the social hierarchy and the death of the grandmother. Unlike Hosoda’s other animated film, this caters more to the Japanese idea of communalism, as the large family functions as a single unit.

The young characters in this film may only see their relatives for certain celebrations, but they still interact in a respectful manner. By making the characters act in such a way, the traditional Japanese family dynamic is preserved amongst viewers. As families grow and live farther from each other, it’s important that an effort is made to maintain a sense of community and respect.

**“Cheaper by the Dozen”**

Shawn Levy’s *Cheaper by the Dozen* also follows a large family, but even with the uncommon size, the children display typical adolescent behaviors. The children are all very distant. While they all live together, they do not appear to be emotionally invested in solving their family’s problems. Dysfunctional families are generally featured in American cinema as an exaggerated representation of our own lives, but also function as a minor scare-tactic. Young audiences observe the poor behavior of the characters, but are reminded of the importance of family, and wish to avoid acting like the on-screen figures.

**SOCIAL HIERARCHY**

While observing Japanese and American cultural formalities, I’ve noticed that Japan’s focus on acting for the benefit of the group also establishes a defined, age-based social ranking system. In the United States, however, social structure is generally based off of two different aspects: money, and experience or connections. These cultural ideals are silently pushed onto adolescents in their daily lives, and easily displayed in popular films. In particular, cinema uses the school setting to present the social maturation of youth (Shary, 2002).

**Sempai-Kouhai Structure**

In every Japanese film I’ve seen, regardless of how the director manages to help audiences escape from the cultural pressures of reality, they maintain this important social construct. Youth in movies can easily show this configuration, as it plays a major role in school life. It doesn’t matter how the older characters act, because they hold this ranking above their juniors, they automatically hold power over them. By reproducing this cultural idea in film, young characters don’t negatively influence viewers, whom may stay under the impression that age is the only reason why they should respect others.

However, as Japanese culture alters slightly to accommodate foreign values, the youth presented in film have also managed to challenge the *sempai-kouhai* relationship. Although subtle, this change can be seen in *Summer Wars,* as the heroine—the *sempai*—celebrates the extreme abilities of the hero—her *kouhai*. When faced with a problem, age doesn’t solve anything. By featuring characters that challenge this hierarchy, Japanese youth can gain confidence in their own skills, regardless of how old they are.

**American Youth: “Mean Girls”**

Age is a minor factor in regards to power, especially in American feature films. While also portrayed in an educational setting, Mark Waters’ *Mean Girls* displays the stages of social power amongst teenage girls. Respect is gained by obvious factors, such as money and personal connections. Although the characters are only in high school, the antagonist is terribly well-known due to her abundance of material possessions, as well as her ability to emotionally manipulate others.

Even though *Mean Girls* is a complete over-exaggeration of the dramatic relationships between young women, it still perceives females as catty and revenge-driven. However, the characters manage to banish these stereotypes in order to improve themselves, which is projected to the young generation of viewers. As the film ends, audiences come to the understanding that just because someone may have the money or social influence to gain respect, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they deserve it.

**THE VALUES OF SELF-EXPRESSION**

Regardless if the film is of Japanese or American origin, I’ve found that cultural beliefs are altered slightly to accommodate themes of self-expression and acceptance. In particular, incorporating social “gray areas” or subcultures addresses a generation’s problems within society, therefore uniting its members.

**“Kamikaze Girls”**

Of the Japanese films I’ve selected, Tetsuya Nakashima’s *Kamikaze Girls* best focuses on the self-expression and the bonds formed between young people. The film features the *Lolita* and *yanki* subcultures, which are generally underrepresented in the media. The two heroines follow very different ways of life. The way they choose to speak and spend their time can be determined by how they dress. Their choices also lead them to different goals. The *lolita* never wishes to find a job, and feels much more comfortable in downtown Tokyo, where the civilians focus more on their appearances. In contrast, the *yanki* is content with staying in the rural setting, as long as she can fix motorcycles. Regardless, neither of their choices fit into the typical path of the Japanese student, leaving them to be ostracized.

While the heroines flourish in the end, they really only have each other for support. Despite the positive tone of the film, it’s implied that Japanese youth are more accepted and will lead fuller lives if they comply with social convention. But as foreign values make a global impact, adolescent viewers can gain the understanding that it’s not necessarily poor form to express oneself, because happiness starts with you, not the acceptance of others.

**“She’s the Man”**

Like *Kamikaze Girls*, *She’s the Man* by Andy Fickman follows a similar format. The heroine takes the identity of her brother in order to pursue her passion for soccer, which in the film is shown as a male-dominated, nearly exclusionary sport. While hiding behind a humorous façade, the film reveals the privileges that men hold over women, and that women have to lie in order to obtain what they want because they’re seen as the inferior gender.

*She’s the Man* perceives most women as passive and docile, while men are ignorant to their own privilege and the problems of others. The role of the heroine is to prove that everyone is equal, and should be given like opportunities. The young girls in the film are raised to believe that they’re the inferior gender, but as they are exposed to the biases around them, have the potential to challenge and defeat their oppressors. This message may appear obvious, but for a young generation, it’s important for girls to see heroic, female figures empowering themselves with possibly extreme methods.

**GLOBALIZATION VIA FILM**

Westernization can easily be seen in Japanese films, from the style of cinematography, to general themes, and unique personalities found in the characters. Film’s great influences on society can be used to start major social changes. However, incorporating a broader, global outlook on how society should function into may appear aggressive, challenging specific traditional, cultural values.

**Changing Society with Film**

Films are a powerful medium for displaying current and implementing future change. With the constant rise in globalization, altering cultural norms by introducing aspects of foreign traditions can either come across as innovative or intrusive and forceful. The films I’ve previously described contain examples of merging classic Japanese and American ideals. As my focus is on the perceptions of youth in film, these ideals directly affect the characters as well as the young generation of viewers.

The biggest changes I’ve encountered while researching regards the social hierarchy and value of an individual through self-expression. While Japanese films still feature the *sempai-kouhai* relationship, the American idea that a person’s age shouldn’t determine their ability or ranking is slowly being introduced. With this new way of thinking, the importance of the individual also increases. In the films, characters that lived to only bring themselves happiness appeared selfish and immature. However, their selfish actions eventually help them build their character, leading them to ultimately help others while discovering their purpose.

Merging cultural values in films can provide liberation to adolescents. By observing the positive outcomes in a cinematic format, confidence in these changes can be built by audiences. However, forcing Western beliefs into Japanese films—thus society—can seem like it’s diluting traditional cultural essences. It’s important to preserve Japanese values, but in order to raise global citizens, the new generation of film viewers should be exposed to a wide range of ideas.

**CONCLUSION**

Japanese and American films, while stylistically quite different, present youth in a way that reflects the nation’s traditional values. Even in animated features, Japanese youth is perceived as respectful and community-driven. Japanese films, however, have managed to display young characters that subtly challenge traditional viewpoints, and take a more global approach to how they live their lives. By doing so, these characters are able to build more self-confidence and focus on their happiness, but still manage to preserve peace within traditional Japanese society.

In the same format, American youth is typically shown as ridiculously independent, motivated, and socially progressive. In my opinion, I’ve found that the actions of young characters in American films depict current social issues, in order to persuade action from an adolescent audience. Traditional values are displayed as part of the story’s conflict, and the progressive, youthful protagonist fights for progression and equality in a constantly-changing world.

In conclusion, I have noticed that Japanese films offer adolescents an escape from reality with altered cultural values, compared to American films, in which the roles of youth in society are greatly over-exaggerated. While the articles I found states that adults shouldn’t be concerned with youth in film, I find that the perceptions of adolescents in movies can be a medium for major social change. That being said, integrating transcultural ideals and breaking stereotypes in the form of popular media is necessary when raising a generation of informed, active citizens.

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