

An Analysis of Japanese Comedy and How It Affects Various Societal Views

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JAPN 310

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April 8, 2014

Introduction

My sense of humor most likely came from my dad, considering that my mom finds it difficult to understand most types of humor. The ability to genuinely laugh at comical things is probably the second most important thing about life, next to art that is. I always love experiencing a good laugh and letting others join in and experience a hearty laugh along with me. Something I often show my friends is the TV program *Whose Line Is It Anyway*, a show entirely centered around improvisation and hilarious beyond measure. Yet having been raised on nothing but American comedy, I became especially interested in the similarities and differences when comparing it to Japanese humor. I was introduced to anime and other forms of Japanese media around the time of middle school, so I have long been familiar with the various aspects and instances within anime that the Japanese find humorous; for example puns, misunderstandings, intelligence differences. But specific types of comedy were mostly unknown to me until researching for this paper. For the purpose of this paper I will be comparing specific types of Japanese comedy and how they reflect certain types of humor to four specific movies that we watched in this class: *Tampopo*, *Swing Girls*, *Shimotsuma Monogatari*, and *Departures*. In typical Japanese society subjects such as marriage and death are not openly discussed. Through humor, dark or personal subjects are more easily brought about in conversation. Previously unspeakable matters that are portrayed in a comical matter ease the stress and unwillingness for discussion and, in my opinion, relay open-mindedness in dealing with difficult social issues. Each of the movies I have chosen to analyze reflects some aspect of Japanese culture that is generally swept under the rug, meaning not openly talked about. But before

delving into each movie's social issues, I would like to give some background information on the different types of Japanese comedy.

Comedy in the Performing Arts

The origins of performing arts in Japan dates back to the earliest history as there are even legends of the gods performing ceremonies and festivals. Each form of comedy that can be seen today is a branched version of the various types that can be found in these legends and ancient texts. In the paragraphs to follow I will be introducing the history and background of each of those forms of comedy in order for the reader to have a better understanding of how I will be relating them to the movies listed.

Rakugo (落語)

The perhaps most well known and most traditional form of comedy in Japan is rakugo, which can be compared to stand-up comedy in the West. The most prominent difference would be that skits and sketches are performed while sitting on the floor giving such performances the nickname "sit-down comedy" as opposed to stand-up. The origins of rakugo can be traced back to two likely sources. The first source is oral traditions passed down from sermons performed in the Jodo Buddhist sect (Powers, Kato 77). The second likely source is said to have come from the 16th century during which civil wars ravaged the country. Attacks from enemy clans could occur at any time, so the defending clans developed a way to keep themselves awake through the night. Storytellers would be designated to keep the Lord and his soldiers awake by telling humorous or interesting stories, leading to the development of modern day rakugo narrators (Powers, Kato 77). The main focus of rakugo is for one man to narrate a story, not always a humorous one, while at the same time acting out each character therefore being able to create an

image and atmosphere in the audience's mind. It also follows a more traditional route of performing within Japanese culture. Performers wear kimonos and narrate their stories using a fan and hand towel as props that are meant to represent a variety of objects, such as chopsticks or even a book. Most rakugo tales end with an ironic twist or a punchline and, from the examples that I've seen, tends to feature a type of dark humor regarding the less than glorious aspects of social life.

Manzai (漫才)

Currently, at least to my understanding, the most popular form of comedy is manzai performances. What makes these performances unique is their use of two different characters, the "tsukkomi" and the "boke". This form of comedy is what is said to have originated from the legends of festivals held by the gods. In another form of ancient text there is a legend of how light was restored to the High Plain of Heaven. One of the goddesses had begun to perform a strip tease on an inverted wooden tub in order to entice the sun goddess out of hiding while also providing some entertainment for the other gods and goddesses. The performance caused an uproar of laughter giving way to the origins of manzai performances (Powers, Kato 75). Another believed origin is found in another type of ancient festival known as "okagura". The components of an okagura performance features a series of dialogue between an anthropomorphic god and a local deity who are referred to as "tayu" and "saizo", respectively (Powers, Kato 76). By performing this festival, the local community is said to flourish and ultimately benefit from the deity's visit. The god, however, is constantly trying to trick the deity into obeying and following him, but the deity proves to be too much of a goof, ignoring the god's orders. These characters are said to have lead to the eventual development of modern day manzai, evolving from a

community blessing performance to a popular comedy routine. Comedy became incorporated into the routine around the time of the Muromachi period and remained ever since. In a modern day manzai performance there is dialogue between the tsukkomi, or straight man, and the boke, or funny man featuring a constant barrage of puns, misunderstandings, and double meanings. These sort of interactions most commonly end with a slap to the head of the boke character, but this simply adds to the hilarity of the situation.

Konto (コント)

As a sub-branch of manzai, konto has very similar aspects to the style and performances that are featured in its routine. Such similarities include the straight-man-funny-man routine. But unlike manzai, konto features the use of props, special effects, and sets. The word konto comes from the French word “conte” meaning a short story or narrative tale, which is exactly what most konto performances are. They can be 30 seconds to 3 minute long performances usually revolving around strange or unusual situations, conversations, or encounters that are acted out between two or more performers.

Sur (シュール)

The final type of Japanese comedy I would like to talk about is known as “sur”, a shorter form of the word “surreal”. And that’s exactly what it is: a strange, dry, sarcastic style of humor that is not very popular in comparison for the previously mentioned forms of comedy. This style of comedy can be compared to American programs such as *The Tim and Eric Show* or *The Eric Andre Show* on Adult Swim, where the majority of their performances do not seem to have a clear punchline or humorous focus; we simply are not sure when to laugh as it presented as more awkward than funny. For the most part sur comedy tends to touch upon issues or aspects or

Japanese society while making fun of these things in a dry way. Popular subjects for sur performances are those involve mocking Japanese culture and sometimes mocking those who mock Japanese culture.

Comedy in Japanese Films

Comedy is something that can always be found in films, whether the genre of the film is comedy or not. A joke can always slip through in any situation. Even films that focus on dark subjects or dark humor tend to feature fragments of humor. One such example is the first film I will be analyzing, *Departures*, as the film focuses on the subject of death. In following the order that I listed the different types of comedy, I would like to follow the same order with the movies that reflect those types of humor.

Departures

Though the film *Departures* touches upon mainly dark and depressing subjects, it has its moments of lighthearted humor. The story centers around Daigo Kobayashi, a cellist with no real direction in life after the disbanding of the orchestra he was apart of. He moves to his hometown with his wife where he begins job hunting. An advertisement asking for “assisting departures” catches his attention, assuming that it is related to a traveling agency. It turns out to be funeral home that prepares the deceased for encoffinement, a very taboo subject in Japanese society. This unwillingness to be associated with an industry that deals with death is something that goes back to the early samurai periods. Similar to the cast system of India, Japan originally had its own class system with untouchables naturally at the bottom. These were the people who dealt with unsanitary or undesirable jobs, including care for the dead. People in that line of work weren’t even considered human by society’s standards at that time. The stigma of such work being

unclean and impure is something that has remained in the minds of Japanese people today, as seen in this film.

Due to their comedic similarity, I have chosen to relate *Departures* to rakugo. As mentioned in my explanation of rakugo, this form of comedy touches upon aspects of everyday life that most people are not comfortable discussing in casual situations. Most of these aspects are not usually considered comedic in nature, such as death or world problems. Yet in the case of *Departures*, the rakugo comedic aspect of it causes the audience to change their views towards death and those involved with taking care of the dead. In presenting death in a comedic way, it make the issues surrounding it easier to discuss; it isn't simply seen as this filthy, forbidden topic.

Shimotsuma Monogatari

As a comical film from beginning to end, *Shimotsuma Monogatari* presents a very engaging and popular style of humor: manzai. Known as *Kamikaze Girls* in the U.S., the film focuses on the relationship between a lolita fashionista and tough girl biker. There are several aspects of this movie that relate itself to manzai humor. The first to be noted is its fast paced, slapstick humor. Momoko's character seems to represent the "straight man" of the act while Ichigo represents the "funny man". Their relationship is very similar to that of manzai acts, filled with misunderstandings and unusual encounters. But it is also through this humor that the characters are able to deal with the problems in their lives. Momoko's adulterous mother becomes the subjects of many a joke, while Ichigo's obsession with her biker gang and leader is something that isn't taken seriously and becomes easy to laugh about. These otherwise gloomy

subjects of adultery and unhealthy obsession are openly jested with and help to strengthen the friendship between these two very different girls who live in very different worlds.

Swing Girls

The comedy presented in *Swing Girls* is very similar to the style described above but with one key difference: the addition of musical instruments as a key component to the movie's comedy. This film presents the viewers with a group of female students who feel that they may never accomplish much in life and therefore become delinquents, of a sort. On the other hand the audience is presented with this very hopeful and talented band that is unable to perform due to food poisoning thanks to the female students leaving their food unrefrigerated for too long. The girls' homeroom teacher is aware of this and blackmails the girls into stepping in as replacements lest they turned in to the principal for their actions. The combination of this underachieving group of girls and their forced interest in the school's band becomes a rip roaring good time of physical humor through their actions with their instruments. But it is also through these instruments that the girls are able to find something in life that they enjoy doing. As mentioned earlier, komo performances are unique in that they include props and such designating the instruments as the comedic props. These props enforce positivity and become a means of enjoyment for the girls, dampening the problems they face in their lives.

Tampopo

Perhaps the most interesting, and by that I mean unusual, film and style of comedy is the relationship between *Tampopo* and sur humor. This type of comedy does not usually rely strictly on the interaction between two people or props and sets. Instead, sur focuses on its slings at a specific culture, be in American or Japanese, and aspects within that culture. In the case of

Tampopo, the audience is presented with food culture as presented through Western and Japanese customs. Donald Richie, an American born Japanese cinema critic claims that the film isn't about Japan at all (Richie, 230). Instead we see it as mocking Western food culture and the various rules of etiquette that Japanese society has adopted from us. In one scene we see a group of women trying to be taught the proper way to eat spaghetti. These women are constantly being interrupted by the Western man on the other side of the room loudly slurping his own noodles and in turn abandon their attempts at politeness and begin to loudly slurp their spaghetti as well. These mannerisms are very relatable to sur comedy because of how polite, Western etiquette is presented as a joke with the example of the Western man not even following the rules himself. Through this humor, an otherwise uptight and serious subject can be lightly joked about. In this way society can learn to loosen up with their otherwise serious and unbending rules and regulations.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is a little farfetched to think that comedy can be used as a means of helping Japanese culture in understanding various problems within their society and becoming more open to discussion about these problems. But my belief is that through comedic situations presented in these films, society can move towards just that. The films presented in this paper dealt with many unwanted and taboo topics on an openly discussed manner. My hope is that viewers are able to understand these subjects in a new light as they are presented through these movies.

Departures gives the audience a brand new view on the subject of death and those that work in the encoffining industry by teaching us that death is not something to be disgusted with; bodies can be very beautifully prepared and respected just as they are in life.

Shimotsuma Monogatari presents some distressing subjects regarding family and social issues, but again presents them in such a way that these ordinarily difficult subjects can be taken lightly allowing comfort and ease between the conversationalists, specifically Momoko and Ichigo. Their friendship is able to grow and strengthen because of their mutual understanding for each other's hardships, yet discussion of these things might not have been possible without the comical chemistry that is shared between them.

As for *Swing Girls*, a group of otherwise hopeless high school girls is able to discover their unique passion for music and instruments along with the joy it brings into their dreary lives. The use of these instruments as their main source of humor brightens their school experience as they leave behind their home troubles in pursuit of winning a musical competition. A group of misfits is able to come together and accomplish something amazing, something they never imagined that could be possible through their use of humor.

Tampopo presents social issues such as gender roles, class status, and food culture and is a fine example of a film that uses comedy as a method of getting the audience's attention regarding societal problems. The viewer is presented with such problems in a way that does not leave them angry or reluctant to further discuss them. We want to discuss them, we want to continue thinking about what these problems are and how they developed into what they are. And it is because of how they are presented that we are interested to continue thinking and discussing about them. Comedy is a wonderful genre that can change our perception of any

subject. It lightens the mood and gives way to better understanding. It can help us through our life's difficulties as it has shown to help the characters within these films.

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