

Harry Barba

An Pham

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Anime and Trendy Dramas Offerings

Japanese popular culture offers many products for individuals to enjoy. Some of those products are; anime, manga, Japanese cinema, television programs, cuisine, and music. But when it comes to speaking about Japanese popular culture, it is important for one to keep in mind the three different cultures; high, middle, and low. High culture includes works like shakespeare and mozart. Middle culture encompasses things like newspapers, public museums, and CNN. Last but not least, low culture, relates to things like pornography, and movies like “The Hangover,” for example. These are all crucial things to know because it allows one to discover in which one of these cultures, Japanese popular culture lies.

If one were to look closely, they can see that high culture has to do with art, values, and traditions of the upper class. Middle culture on the other hand is based off of media, which is the most relatable to Japanese popular culture. When it comes to media in Japanese popular culture (anime, and trendy dramas), audiences are extremely important for those forms of media to be successful. If they are successful, the impact that they can leave on their audience is immense. Therefore, media forms like anime and trendy dramas, serve audiences more than just entertainment; they offer potential touring locations, religious practices, and shopping catalogues. Authors and writers, Takayoshi Yamamura, Shusuke Murai, Jolyon Baraka Thomas, Gabriella Lukacs, George J .Tanabe Jr, all show evidence of this.

Anime has the power of providing one with more than just something fun to watch, it gives one a possible location to tour. Professor and author Takayoshi Yamamura in his article “Contents Tourism and Local Community Response: *Lucky star* and Collaborative Anime-Induced Tourism in Washimiya,” shows evidence of this. For example when Yamamura writes, “The Washimiya case demonstrated that subcultures created via anime have high levels of appeal, especially to young adults both domestically and abroad, and have the power to attract people to the locality” (Yamamura 63). Yamamura is saying that anime television series have the effect of serving viewers more than just entertainment; it provides audiences with possible locations to tour. Sites featured in anime series highlight the locations authenticity, leaving a strong impact on viewers. For example the anime series *Lucky star*, which originally came from a four-frame manga series by Yoshimizu Kagami. The series was produced by Kyoto Animation and was broadcasted in twenty four episodes from April to September 2007 by sixteen TV stations (Yamamura 60). The anime shows the daily life of four high school girls and the people around them. Two of the girls, Hiiragi Kagami & Hiiragi Tsukasa, are the Shinto priest daughters. He is the priest of the Takamiya Shrine. In the animated television series version of the manga, Takamiya Shrine is modeled on Washinomiya Shrine in the town of Washimiya. Washimiya is situated in northeast Saitama and had a population of approximately 34,000 in 2006 (Yamamura 62). Even though this town was small, the amount of power it had on viewers after being featured on the show *Lucky star* was incredible.

Before the show first aired, Washimiya hardly received any tourism. But once the television series *Lucky star* premiered, that all changed. In example as Yamamura writes, “It used to have hardly any tourism but the town suddenly began receiving domestic and foreign

tourists after having been used as a location for *Lucky star*” (Yamamura 62). Because the opening sequence of the anime television series featured the *torii* (shrine gate) of Washinomiya shrine, individuals became influenced to tour this specific site. This opening scene was powerful to viewers. In one example Yamamura writes, “Every episode, viewers watched the same opening scene, which was an effective combination of high-quality graphic background images, the story’s characters...This opening left a powerful impression of the scenery of Washimiya on viewers” (Yamamura 60). In other words the town featured in the show, was nearly identical to the one in person. Everything from the red color of the shrine to the decorations hanging off of it was depicted in the introduction of the series. *Lucky star* not only illustrated the life of four high school girls, it served as a guide for a possible touring destination. Washimiya is now visited by fans across Japan as a so-called sacred site.

One might ask, is this just one case of viewers being influenced by anime to go visit a location that was featured in a show? The anime series *Slam Dunk*, shows the life of a high school basketball player known as Hanamichi Sakuragi. It originally comes from a sports themed manga series written and illustrated by Takehiko Inoue. Which was then converted into an anime series by Toei Animation. In the anime series, a railroad crossing located on the Kamakura, Kanagawa coastline of Japan, is featured in the show. After the show aired, many fans began visiting the railroad crossing. In one example Murai writes, “A railroad crossing located on the scenic coastline of Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, has been visited by fans of the popular anime series *Slam Dunk*...” (Murai 1). In other words, fans after seeing the show, went and visited Kamakura, which is where the railroad crossing featured in the show is located. This proves that Yamamura’s findings about the case of Washimiya, didn’t just apply to a single case.

Rather it was a larger phenomenon. For some, the primary factor to go tour a specific location is how much it costs. For others, that factor might be visiting a location because it was featured in an anime television series. Murai writes, “Japanese animation is already a key motivation behind some foreign tourists’ visits to the country, with some spots featured in Japanese animation becoming popular sightseeing locations” (Murai 1). In simpler terms, anime television series provide one with more than just entertainment, it presents one with a site to tour. But anime television series have not been the only form of media to provide one with more than entertainment.

Japanese animated movies, like anime television series, have the effect of offering one more than just entertainment. In the case of animated movies, they offer one religious practices. Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Jolyon Baraka Thomas, in his article “Shukyo Asobi and Miyazaki Hayao’s Anime,” argues that entertainment mixed with religion can influence one to act religiously. For example when Thomas writes, “This deployment of religious and playful media or action can result in the creation of entirely new religious doctrines, interpretations, rituals, and beliefs” (Thomas 73). Thomas refers to this as the phrase *Shukyo asobi*. Which is the Japanese definition for entertainment (*shukyo*) and religion (*asobi*).

Animated Movies, like anime television series, serve viewers more than just something to do on their leisure time. They give one an opportunity to partake in some religious activity. To make this claim credible, let's take a closer look at the animated film, *My Neighbor Totoro*.

The animated movie, *My Neighbor Totoro*, is about two sisters (Satsuki and Mei) and their father (Tatsuo Kusakabe) moving to a new house to be closer to their mother, who is

recovering from a sickness. The film later goes on to illustrate how Satsuki and Mei discover that their new house is filled with nature spirits. These nature spirits in the film, are similar to those spirits known as Kami in the Japanese religion, Shinto. Which are referred to as, *totoro* by the producer of the film. This film had the power of swaying viewers to act religiously after watching it. Thomas writes, “ One person, writing on the influence of the film and about *totoro* in particular states: ‘Often with my older sister we would...hold an umbrella and try to pray for the sprouts to grow,’ mimicking a scene in the movie in which the *totoro* lead Mei and Satsuki in a prayer-dance to grow sprouts into a giant tree” (Thomas 84). In this case after watching the film two siblings went on to reenact a ritual performed in the movie. Films like these really do offer one with more than just entertainment.

My Neighbor Totoro was not the only film that offered viewers religious practices, *Spirited Away* is another example. This film tells the story of a ten year old girl, known as Chihiro Ogino, who enters a spirit world, after moving to a new neighborhood. She is attempting to return to the real world with her parents, who were turned into pigs by the witch (Yubaba), by working in Yubaba's bathhouse. The film offered the religious belief of Musubi, which is defined as a spiritual productive energy that binds organisms together. This lead to a spiritual response from some members of the audience. For example when Thomas writes, “Some members of the audience have had a spiritual response to that movie as well: from the aforementioned environmental commitment based upon the idea that all organisms are spiritually connected, to a renewed respect for the distinction between divine and human, to striving for a new kind of spiritual love” (Thomas 86). In other words, before watching the film, some members of the audience did not necessarily believe that all organisms were spiritually connected. But after

being presented with this religious activity, they began to seek a spiritual love relating to this religious idea of Musubi. Because of this one is able to see how animated movies are far more than entertainment for viewers; they have the effect of influencing members of the audience to act religiously.

Some might ask why is this incorporation of religion in entertainment so powerful, that it influences viewers to act religiously? Well this is because these types of films project religious messages and serve as sites for ritualized action (Thomas 78). The religious elements illustrated in films are either traditional or modified based upon the needs of the films. In example when Thomas writes, “They can also provide sites and models for ritual activity, reflecting both preexisting ritual traditions and modifications and innovations of ritual based upon the film” (Thomas 79). But regardless, it may influence viewers to partake in some form of religious activity.

Additionally, viewers often create their own perspective of the religion offered from the animated film. Author, George J, Tanabe, Jr in his article “Playing with Religion” shows evidence of this (Tanabe 96). Tanabe writes, “Religion and entertainment, *shukyo* and *asobi*, share the ability of enabling audiences to escape familiar territory and enter into fantasies, which can be mundane in the creation of idealized (or even real) past, or extraordinary in constructing an entirely imaginary world” (Tanabe 98). In other words audiences are able to escape into their mind to construct an imaginary world, after viewing a film with religious content in it. Anime has offered viewers with more than just being entertained, religion has also been presented. But anime has not the been the only form of media to provide one with more than just entertainment.

Trendy dramas have given one, more than the experience of entertainment, it has provided viewers with shopping catalogues. Gabriella Lukacs in her book, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan*, illustrates how trendy dramas presented one with more than just entertainment. For example when Lukacs writes, “First and foremost trendy dramas integrated entertainment and advertising” (Lukacs 121). In other words trendy dramas made use of advertising of the latest styles in the actual show. Trendy dramas are a type of Japanese drama, that encompasses themes of romance, comedy, and horror. But it wasn’t until the late 1980’s one was able to start seeing this. The drama *For Friday Wives* for example, portrays the lives of three women living in a suburban apartment complex and the main themes are friendship, love, and adultery. This drama does not illustrate family relationships, and is the first that is not intended for family viewing. *For Friday Wives*, was a forerunner for trendy dramas. These trendy dramas were more lifestyle oriented and came out in the late 80’s. The first official trendy drama, *Those Eyes of Yours are Under Arrest* had more of a theme of love with a hint of mystery, focusing on advertising and getting individuals to participate in mass consumption. The focus of the trendy drama was not to educate its viewers or bring families together but rather, to show how one could not only attain happiness but new trendy clothes (Lukacs 40).

Although trendy dramas showed how one could attain happiness, they served viewers more as shopping catalogues. Each episode of a show featured the latest trends, which were worn by the actors in the show. For example when Lukacs writes, “Episodes are produced merely a week ahead of broadcasting, so that dramas are filmed in the same season that they are watched, and the characters wear clothing that reflects the latest fashion trends” (Lukacs 44). In simpler

terms, episodes were produced a week before they were broadcasted in order to have the main characters wear the latest trends. The lead character Hidetoshi Sena in the trendy drama *Long Vacation*, was always wearing the latest trends. This drama shows the relationship between a pianist (Hidetoshi Sena) and a model (Minami Hiyama). In one episode, Sena is constantly wearing a suit and tie during the day. Even at night, he goes to sleep wearing a Los Angeles Dodgers jersey. This is significant because during this time the Dodgers had just recently signed Japanese pitcher, Hideo Nomo. Nomo was credited for opening the door for other Japanese players. He also made history as being the first Japanese pitcher to throw a no hitter. As a Dodger he wore the number sixteen. That is the exact jersey Sena wore in this episode. Viewers almost used Sena as one of those in store mannequins wearing trendy clothes. At the same time of being entertained, viewers became informed of the latest fashionable styles. Which in this case was Hideo Nomo's number sixteen jersey. But it almost seems as if viewers were more focused on buying the latest styles rather than being entertained by the storyline of the drama. In example Lukacs writes, "The main selling point of trendy dramas is not the story but information of the latest trends"(Lukacs 44). Without the incorporation of the latest trends or shopping catalogues, trendy dramas would only bore the intended audience. The story lines of the dramas were not that intriguing for viewers, which explains why television networks avoided airing the same episodes. If television networks were to have aired the same episode multiple times, the show would have no longer been seen as a shopping catalogue for viewers. For example Lukacs writes, "Reruns stop functioning as sources of entertainment on the latest of information on current trends (i.e., they lose their informational value), and the story lines of the dramas are not so interesting that their value as narrative entertainment can be the primary (or sole) selling

point” (Lukacs 44). For this reason trendy dramas were seen more as a shopping catalogue rather than a form of amusement.

Even some of today’s Japanese dramas may provide viewers with a visual of in style clothing they can purchase. For example the 2016 Japanese drama, *The Full Time Wife Escapist*. This drama illustrates how a housekeeper (Mikuri Moriyama) with a graduate degree ends up marrying the owner (Hiramasa Tsuzaki) of the house she cleans. The main character, Mikuri Moriyama is always wearing the latest clothing. In the first episode of the show she is wearing a designer white shirt with blue jeans. Seeing Moriyama wear these trendy clothes could have the effect of giving viewers an idea of what kind of clothes they want to buy, the next time they go shopping. Because of this, it is reasonable to say that not only were individuals using serial dramas as a shopping catalogue during the 90’s but also in more modern times.

With these forms of media offering individuals locations for tourism, religious practices, and home shopping, one might say that there are negative effects of media. Author Sue Beeton in her book, *Film Induced Tourism* goes on to talk about the effect film can have on human behavior. For example when Beeton writes, “The effect of film on human behaviour has long been debated, especially in terms of influencing acts of violence and effecting social change” (Beeton 7). Film can have a negative effect on individuals, especially children. Film that involves acts of violence, affects children by making them less sensitive to violence, increases their aggressiveness and antisocial behavior, resulting in an increase of fear of becoming victims and craving for violence in entertainment and real life. In example when Beeton writes, “The American Academy Pediatrics claims that media violence affects violence affects children by making them less sensitive to acts of violence, increasing, their aggressiveness and antisocial

behaviour, increasing their fear of becoming victims and increasing their appetite for violence, in entertainment and real life” (Beeton 7). But if one were to analyze the media forms mentioned before, none of them really have anything to do with violence. The anime television series *Lucky star*, goes on to tell the story of four girls in high school. Rather than violence, the series mainly shows the main characters (Konata Izumi) love for anime, video games, and manga. In the case of the film, *My Neighbor Totoro*, audiences are shown the interactions between the main characters of the film and friendly nature spirits. This is the same with *Spirited Away*. Viewers are able to see the incorporation of Musubi in the film. Which in no way shape or form is violent. When it comes to trendy dramas, barbarity is absent. As mentioned before, the main thing illustrated in the television serials are characters attempting to attain happiness and trendy clothes. While anime and trendy dramas offer something different, they all present one with something deeper than just entertainment.

Media forms like anime and trendy dramas, serve audiences more than just entertainment; they offer potential touring locations, religious practices, and shopping catalogues. The anime television series’ *Lucky star* and *Slam Dunk* have provided viewers with possible locations to tour. Animated movies have the effect of influencing one to act religiously. For example the films *My Neighbor Totoro*, and *Spirited Away*. Trendy dramas not only provided one with something to do during their leisure time, it gave viewers an opportunity to shop from home in the 90’s and still does today. Regardless of the different things motion pictures propose, at the end of the day they all present one with more than just recreation. It is intriguing to see that anime, movies, and trendy dramas can be used for more than just leisure activities. Viewers take it to a different extent. Is it possible for viewers to appreciate anime, and

trendy dramas without seeking something deeper? Based on the information provided above, it is acceptable to say no. These types of mass communication must provide one with more than just entertainment. One must be able to either relate or be recommended a location to tour, a religious practice, or objects to consume in order for an anime television series and film, and drama to be appealing. Because without these incorporations added into these types of media, viewers may end up refusing to watch anime television series and films, and dramas like *Lucky star*, *Slam Dunk*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Spirited Away*, *Long Vacation*, and *The Full Time Wife Escapist*. If viewers stopped watching these forms of media what would happen to Japan? Would it be able to maintain a stable economy? Would Japanese popular culture still be a thing? We may not find this out, but for now, one must take note on how powerful anime, and dramas can be on viewers, if they incorporate the right things.

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