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### JAPN 308 Final Essay

#### INTRODUCTION

Wherever you go, movies are pretty up-to-date on the times, on the times and what is going on. Whether it be *Godzilla*<sup>1</sup> with it's message of anti-atomic bombs right after World War II or new animated movies to appeal to those who like anime television shows (1954). Cinema shows what the people want. In this sense I believe that cinema accurately reflects upon the current popular culture of Japan. The first way I wil discuss this is through animated movies. Anime movies like from the Pokemon Franchise or Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli both are influenced by what people want, and influence poular culture fads. Next, is cinema evolution. Mostly the evolutions are popular in themselves, but some things are taken from popular culture of the time. Lastly I will discuss real events affect on popular culture. Things like movies based on true stories, real products in movies, or actions based on movies can be seen and affect or be affected by popular culture.

#### ANIME MOVIES

Anime is one part of Japanese popular that we can see in a lot of places. Not only is it popular in its home country, but also abroad, like in America. Anime is undeniably part of Japanese popular culture, and as so we see a lot of in in Japanese cinema. There are many movies

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<sup>1</sup> *Godzilla*. Ishirou Honda, Toho, 1954.

classified as anime movies in Japan, and also many production companies and animation studios that solely make these sort of films.

One article that we read in class was *Japan-Otacool Nation Trends of Japanese Otaku Youth* by Joseph Britton. In this article Britton focuses on otaku culture in Japan, giving some examples of characteristics that describe otaku as well as activities that they might engage in. In one section there are:

perceptions and opinions, by those surveyed, of otaku life today. As an added note, the Japanese youth culture is very sensitive to changes in trends that seem to sweep the country in dramatic form and quickly change direction like flocks of birds or schools of fish. OTAKU NATURE... 7. lovers of anime (Britton 13)<sup>2</sup>

This quote shows how fickle people can be in their interests. People can constantly change their view on what is popular culture, and this phrase that Britton uses comparing people and the trends to birds and fish explains this very well. This can also relate to Japanese cinema and popular culture. Since popular culture is ever changing, so are the movies that are coming out in theaters. They constantly make more movies so appeal to new fads and trends. The second part of the quote, about otaku nature, may show how the otaku's love for anime can affect popular culture. Since they love anime so much they are likely to go see animated movies that interest them. Japanese cinema companies want to appeal to many people, and since otaku culture is a part of popular culture, so they make animated movies. This shows how Japanese cinema can parallel popular culture through otaku and their wants. Since they know someone people want it and that it could be considered popular with a lot of people, cinema companies would want to create movies of the more recent and especially popular anime shows or games to gather audiences.

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<sup>2</sup>Britton, Joseph. "Japan-Otacool Nation Trends of Japanese Otaku Youth." *Cultures Croisees Japan-France*, L'Harmattan, Paris, France, 2008.

One example of animated movies that go along with popular culture is the Pokemon movies. In one article called *The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth* by Anne Allison, the author talks about Japanese youth and how they affect the popular culture in Japan. In one section the author discusses the Pokemon Franchise in relation to the youth and their interests. It says:

Pokémon – what some have called the global kids’ trend of the 1990s. A property that started out small in 1996 – a Game Boy game designed for domestic consumers – Pokémon soon expanded into a media-mix empire – of trading cards, television cartoon, movie series, video games, tie-in merchandise. By 1998, it was selling around the world, including the United States, where it generated a huge craze that the American press labeled ‘pokemania’. In the midst of a bruising recession, the success of Pokémon abroad was deemed a sign of Japan’s new *bunka pawa* (cultural power) at home. (Allison 92-93)<sup>3</sup>

This quote talks about the explosion of the popularity of Pokemon in Japan, the United States of America, and even the rest of the world. It was also popular across more forms of media than just cinema, it also had card games, video games, television shows, and merchandise. Even today we see more ever changing products affiliated with the Pokemon Franchise. These changes show an examples of the evolution of popular culture. Just like as how they came out with new movies to appeal to the new audiences, Japanese cinema also changes with popular culture. Even recently they came out with a new movie, probably to appeal to the younger generation and after the hype of Pokemon Go. This new movie is a prime example of how Japanese cinema uses what is new in popular culture. The people saw that the new type of game was doing really well, so they decided to use that.

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<sup>3</sup>Allison, Anne. "The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 2/3, Mar. 2009, pp. 89-111. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1177/0263276409103118.

Another example of animated movies that go along with popular culture is Hayao Miyazaki films from the Studio Ghibli. The next article that talks about Hayao Miyazaki and his works was called *The Animated Worlds of Hayao Miyazaki* and was written by Lucy Wright and Jerry Clode. In this article they discuss Hayao Miyazaki's works, mainly focusing on *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, which were more successful. The article mentions one other work, "Nausicaa marked his [Hayao Miyazaki] expansion from comic artist to film director with the translation of his popular and long-running manga (comic) of the same name into an animated film" (Wright and Clode 46).<sup>4</sup> This example talked about in the quote is a good sample of Japanese cinema paralleling popular culture in relation to animated movies. It shows how when there is something current in popular culture Japanese cinema companies capitalize on it by making a movie. In Hayao Miyazaki's case his movies can also affect popular culture not just be based off of it. One case was discussed when we in class. This was the *My Neighbor Totoro* example, where after the student watched the movie they liked they started to imitate some of the actions, like when the children were trying to grow plants in the garden with Totoro (1988).<sup>5</sup> It was not exactly stated that the Japanese students did the same things, but they may have also imitated some other movie scenes just like the American student did with *My neighbor Totoro*.

These examples of anime movies can show how Japanese cinema parallels Japanese popular culture. These anime movies, like the Pokemon series of movies, can come about because the production and animation companies see what is considered popular at the time and capitalize on in. they are created because some people, like the otaku from the otacool article,

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, Lucy and Jerry Clode. "The Animated Worlds of Hayao Miyazaki." Metro, no. 143, Summer 2005, pp. 46-51. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=17528472&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=17528472&site=ehost-live).

<sup>5</sup> *My Neighbor Totoro*. Hayao Miyazaki, Toho, 1988.

think that they are interesting. Lastly, not only are they influenced by popular culture, but they are influence fads for the time.

## CINEMA EVOLUTION

Cinema is constantly evolving and changing with new technology and people's wants. Before cinema was drama troupes, like Kabuki actors, then came moving pictures, sound, color, animation, and computer generated images. Each thing more impressive than the last, changing with the times. The Japanese cinema companies incorporated these new practice because the people wanted something new and exciting, and because the people want it they provide.

One example of the change in Japanese cinema has to do with the sound aspect. Everywhere cinema used to not have sound playing. There was silent movies with text on the screen or even narrators to tell you what was going on in the film while you were watching it. In Japan they had the benshi as an occupation. Just like the narrators from Kabuki, these people narrated the movie. One book talks about these people, Donald Richie's *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History, with a Selective Guide to DVDs and Videos*. In the first chapter he discusses the beginnings of Japanese cinema and the banshi who had a role stemming from the Kabuki narrators. In one part Richie mention that

The benshi filled in the gaps of knowledge Western viewers had acquired long before. They were "a reassuring native person with a presumed acquaintance of the foreign object," ...In addition to his educational role the benshi was essential to the film-viewing experience. ...not only made a short program longer but more coherent. ... The benshi was also required to fill the time. This he accomplished in various ways. ... the benshi mostly filled in the time with lengthy explanations, a time-consuming rhetoric, and drawn-out, often moralizing conclusions. (Richie 19-20)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Richie, Donald. "A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: a Concise History, with a Selective Guide to DVDs and Videos." New York: Kodansha USA, 2012.

Here Richie talks about how important the benshi were in Japanese cinema, they had more than just the simple role of saying what was going on in the movie, they had so much more to do to make the audience understand. I believe that the benshi itself is a sort of popular culture. The premise behind the role came over from Kabuki theater which was really popular. So, basically, even at the start of Japanese cinema there was some sort of popular culture present. This example can show how the two things accurately parallel each other.

Most other parts of the Japanese cinema probably just became popular the first time they came out, influencing, instead of being influenced by, popular culture. The first time someone heard sound, or saw colored images, or watch animated or computer generated images type movies they were probably amazed. Making cinema the new hit thing. It had improved greatly, so people may have wanted to see more of it. Even if the hype slowly died down, they were still considered popular at the time.

#### REAL LIFE EVENTS

One way that cinema reflects upon current popular culture is through actually being based on real life events. There are many movies around the world that are based on true stories. Whether it be a tragic tale or heartwarming fluff piece, a lot of movies take their plots from true events that happened in their country or maybe even another one.

In one article by Sarah Ward called *Movie Making Myths: Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter* the author describes a situation where movies are based off of real life events. She starts off her article with:

Many a great myth begins with a prelude, offering up a statement that solidifies its background. ... starts with white text on a black screen, the words ‘This is a true story’

announcing the veracity of the narrative to follow. With three more sentences, the proclamation continues: (Ward 62)<sup>7</sup>

This quote is an example of what one might see when starting a new movie that is said to be inspired by a true story. In a sense, I believe that movies based off of a true story can be considered popular culture. Since real events reflect on the culture of Japan, and the movie itself can make the event popular, I believe the two things work together to make the story and Japanese cinema piece to be considered popular culture, so they parallel each other and work together. An example of a movie based on real events is *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*. Although the movie was created in America it still shows popular culture in Japan. There is even a Hachikou Memorial Statue in Shibuya to honor the loyal dog from Akita. This example may be from America, but since the story of the dog is so popular and part of Japanese culture, it shows how their culture can even be seen in other countries cinema.

Another way that movies can have real life events in them is through products. The one case I found is the use of Line. In John Kang's article called *What You Need to Know About Line, One of the World's Most popular Messaging Apps* the authors discusses Line and how it has grown to become so popular all around the world. In two sections he mentions Line's international success:

The biggest tech IPO of 2016...Line Corp., which operates the Line messaging app, is set to launch the year's biggest IPO for a technology company when it lists its shares in New York on Thursday and then in Tokyo on Friday. It could raise as much as \$1.3 billion, valuing the company at about \$6.9 billion. ...Most globally successful Asian internet company...Line Corp. is the only Asian internet company to achieve international success, with more than 218 million users around the world. Line is the most popular

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<sup>7</sup> WARD, SARAH. "Movies Making Myths: Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter." *Metro*, no. 184, Mar. 2015, pp. 60-64. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=102573684&site=ehost-live.

messaging app in Japan, Thailand and Taiwan, and is also popular in Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world. (Kang)<sup>8</sup>

This quote shows how popular the Line app has been around the world, not just Japan. Most everyone in Japan uses the app to communicate, most of the Japanese students that go to California State University of Monterey Bay are known to use the app for messaging, calling, et cetera. No doubt this app is part of Japanese popular culture. In relation to Japanese cinema, since the app has gained popularity in real life, they decided to put in an appearance of the app in Japanese movies. When I discussed it with a Japanese transfer student she noted how the Line app has been appearing more in movies she has watched. This appearance of this popular culture product shows how Japanese cinema parallels with popular culture in Japan. The app was popular so they put it into movies so the Japanese people could relate to the characters with their use of Line.

The last real life event is an action, which I also discussed about with a Japanese transfer student. It is the “kabe-don” action on sort of pushing the girl or love interest against a wall in order to get closer to them and also sort of trap them in order to talk to them. In one article by 岡田祥平 (Okada Shohei) called *新語・流行語に与えるマス・メディアの影響力—「壁ドン」の二つの意味を例に考える—* (*The Influence of Mass Media on Neologisms / Words in Fashions : A Case Study of Two Meanings of KABE-DON*) the author talks about kabe-don. He gives a quick explanation of what kabe-don is and then some examples of where you can see it. He also mentions that it fulfills some girls’ desire for a forceful press, showing the man is in

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<sup>8</sup> Kang, John. "What You Need To Know About Line, One Of The World's Most Popular Messaging Apps." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 07 Feb. 2017. Web. Accessed on 03 Dec. 2017.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkang/2016/07/14/what-you-need-to-know-about-line-messaging-app/#3d33c41559fc>.



charge (岡田祥平 271)<sup>9</sup>. Recently, in the movie *Strobe Edge*, which was based off of the hit manga of the same name, there was a kabe-don scene in the live-action movie involving the heroine of the movie and one of the two love interests (2015).<sup>10</sup> According to the Japanese exchange student, after this movie came out the action of kabe-don became more popular in Japan. This is a prime example of Japanese cinema affecting popular culture in Japan, but also being affected by popular culture. First, it was the movie created because the manga was popular. Then, after the movie came out with the kabe-don scene, the action became part of popular culture.

Having some basis in real life and it's popular culture shows how Japanese cinema parallels Popular culture. In some cases it works with true stories to make one another popular. Sometimes it can take a real life product, like Line, and use its' popularity. Lastly, it can make something from the movies popular in real life, like the kabe-don action seen in *Strobe Edge*, while at the same time still being affected by popular culture from getting the story from a manga. Japanese cinema is deeply associated with the popular culture of Japan, especially with real events.

## CONCLUSION

From all of these examples, we can see that Japanese cinema can accurately reflect upon the current popular culture of Japan. We can see this with otaku culture, in that since there is a need for animated films, the film industry create them for the people. We can also see this with the Pokemon Franchise and Hayao Miyazaki and his company of Studio Ghibli. Since

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<sup>9</sup> 岡田祥平 (2015) 「新語・流行語に与えるマス・メディアの影響カー「壁ドン」の二つの意味を例に考える —」 『新潟大学教育学部研究紀要 人文・社会科学編』 第7巻第2号

<sup>10</sup> *Strobe Edge*. Ryuuichi Hiroki, Toho, 2015.

they are so popular, and create movies, their movies reflect well on Japanese popular culture. Besides animated movies, we see how cinema goes along with popular culture at its origins with the benshi. Then even as it evolves, cinema itself can become popular culture. We lastly see their parallelism is real life events. Some are based on true stories, so while cinema makes the story popular, the story has Japanese culture and makes the film part of the culture. There is also the putting in of popular culture products, like Line, to appeal to more people that watch the movie. Then, lastly, there is people taking actions from the movie, like mentioned with *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Strobe Edge*. All these things show how the two things, Japanese cinema and popular culture in Japan, and affect each other and go along together.

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