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JASC Mass Media Table Paper

Mass Media, Gender Roles, and Popular Culture in Japan and the United States

"Living in Japan during its sharpest transition to an western way of life, I was astonished by the speed and force with which the American brand took hold. I saw a culture with thousands of years of tradition behind it vanquished in two generations. Suddenly, high school girls were selling themselves after class for $150 a trick so they'd have cash to buy American jeans and handbags." – Kalle Lasn, founder of Adbusters, in *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*™ (xiv).

The above quote puts the issue rather bluntly: Mass media has the power to change even solidly ingrained cultural behaviors. Because of the rapid nature of the media, such cultural changes often occur without allowing time for critical evaluation. It is through the mass media that we many of us interact with each other on a daily basis without even realizing it; this mediated interaction occurs even in fact-to-face conversation, when one might share a joke originally seen on television or quote a snippet of movie dialogue. The study of the mass media is a critical component if we are to fully understand cultural perceptions of the world in which we live.

In this paper I would like to briefly examine how gender roles are portrayed in both the Japanese and American mass media through the construct of popular culture. This is an especially interesting topic due to the consumption in Japan of American television and film and the increasing consumption of Japanese media forms in the United States, especially animation and video games. Popular culture, in its modern variant, could not exist without the influence of mass media. It is through the promulgation by the media that forms of "popular culture" become "popular." While the

exact definitions of the terms “popular culture” and “mass culture” have been the subjects of much debate, the definition I prefer is that it is an “administered, commodified culture pretargeted and produced for large numbers of consumers” (Ivy 240). The cultures of Japan and the United States are media-saturated, in that people interact daily with different media forms, often without realizing that such an interaction is occurring. It is important to study how interactions with media occur not only for anthropological reasons, but also because by studying the media of other countries we as citizens become better able to perceive our own native media structures.

Much of my previous work has been in looking at how women have been portrayed in the Japanese popular cultural forms of *anime* (Japanese animation) and *manga* (Japanese comics). Japan is unique in a study of the world’s media for the prominent role manga plays, and although anime seems to be more popular than manga in the United States, manga is generally a more highly regarded and more oft-consumed medium than is animation in Japan. For example, *Sh kan Sh nen Jump* (*Weekly Boys’ Jump*), with a weekly circulation of between five and six million, is the most popular manga magazine in Japan and one of the best-selling weekly magazines in the world (Schodt 1996: 88). Also, in its year 2000 White Paper, Japan’s Ministry of Education ranked anime and manga “among the most important forms of artistic expression in the modern Japanese cultural environment” (“Education White Paper”). Some anime and manga fans have praised this pronouncement because they perceive it to mean the two media are finally receiving the critical attention they so richly deserve. However, along with official recognition can come increased homogenization of the medium as it

becomes a cultural product ready for consumption; it stands to reason that manga and anime would not be so highly lauded if they did not represent sanctioned cultural norms.

Yet, popular culture can be seen as occupying what Victor Turner (1969) terms "liminal space." This liminality, or "in-betweenness," enables forms of popular culture to assume a variety of meanings. For example, Jennifer Robertson's analysis of the Takarazuka theater demonstrates how a mode of popular culture, accepted and promoted by the mainstream culture, can be seen as having different meanings to those who are actively producing and promoting the theater and those who are fans of the theater (Robertson 1998). The progenitors of the theater intended it to function as a way of teaching young women how to best take care of men. It was thought that by portraying men onstage, the women would be better able to understand and empathize with their husbands when they finally left the theater and were married. On the other hand, it could be argued that by assuming masculinity onstage, the actors are in a way subverting the dominant ideology of male superiority. Thus, the fluidity of the liminal space means that meaning is not necessarily fixed, and is therefore able to be reinterpreted in a different and potentially subversive fashion, giving the popular cultural form a new meaning.

In order to accurately assess the mass media, it is crucial to understand the structures through which it functions and generates meaning. Mitsunobu Sugiyama (2000) summarizes the current state of Japanese mass media in his article "Media and Power in Japan." He details the influence the dominant LDP government exerts on televised media due to its power as a regulating and licensing agency. This is especially true of public television channel NHK, as the chairman of NHK is chosen by the Prime Minister and the government controls the channel's subscription rates, which are the

NHK's only source of revenue (Sugiyama 2000: 195). Due to government pressure on NHK and commercial channels alike, there is a strong drive to not appear politically biased. Japanese newspapers, although not under as direct of control of the LDP government as the television broadcasters, are still strongly influenced by the government because of how closely news agencies work with the government in gathering news and writing the stories (Sugiyama 2000: 197). Thus, the Japanese government exerts a powerful force on television broadcasting and print media alike, and therefore has a strong influence on the transmission of culture within the mass media.

One of the many ways of examining the mass media is how gender roles and relations are depicted. In Midori Fukunishi Suzuki's study on women on television (1995), she looks at the problems of how women are portrayed on Japanese television and what is being done to combat the inadequacies. First, she says there is a lack of critical thinking about television and especially television commercials among girls and women (77). On the television itself, there are, generally speaking, two men for every one woman onscreen (78). When women are onscreen, they are often shown in "traditional" roles such as housekeeping or shopping, and mainstream gender role stereotyping is reinforced (79). Additionally, women are also used as sexual objects, both in commercials and actual television shows (81). The age range of women onscreen is also much more narrow that that of men (78-9). Through constant reporting on events surrounding the emperor and the royal family, the media reinforces the idea of a deeply rooted patriarchy in Japan (82-3). Finally, Suzuki says that women are not often on the staffs of Japanese television stations, and end up in positions of negligible authority when they are (83). She then illustrates how organizations such as Women's Action Group and

the Forum for Citizen's Television are trying to change institutionalized gender biases and ways of presenting women, but the pace of change within the industry is very slow (84-9). This study corroborates another study on women in Japanese media, which found five principles of how women are generally portrayed in the mass media: Women and men are evaluated differently, women are objects, women are subordinate, a woman's ability is low, and a woman's place is in the home (Cooper-Chen 1997: 211-212). Even though these studies do not focus specifically on different forms of popular culture as transmitted via the Japanese mass media, they are helpful because they work to establish the general climate and attitudes toward gender role differentiation in Japan and help to contextualize the portrayal of women in popular culture.

Mass media forms such as manga are products of the modern Japanese popular cultural environment, and therefore they must necessarily reinforce (or be perceived to reinforce) the dominant cultural values held dear by society at large. In that sense, manga are "pro-establishment" as researcher Sharon Kinsella claims (Kinsella 2000). However, like many popular culture texts, there is not necessarily one correct way in which to read them; they can be read both as cultural products that support current mores and attitudes concerning women as well as products that, in a more subtle manner, critique this stance. Thus, manga may seem to be "pro-establishment," while simultaneously promoting ideas that are potentially subversive. Mass media can also function in ways not originally intended by those creating its content. In his article "Japanese Daytime Television, Popular Culture, and Ideology," Andrew Painter (1996) identifies the production of intimacy, on both a national and a cultural level, as one of television's primary functions in Japan. This is especially important in a culture such as Japan's, "where intimate and

informal face-to-face communication is usually restricted to clearly defined 'in-group' contexts" (Painter 1996: 197). However, this generation of intimacy sometimes appears to be an unconscious decision on the part of the producers of television shows, who are often, like television producers in America, more concerned with how well their shows do in the ratings than the social impact these programs may have (Painter 1996: 199). In this way, the mass media can be seen as functioning in a very culturally specific way, even though this may not be their direct aim.

It is interesting to note the ways in which cultural themes between Japan and the West are constantly being reshaped, recontextualized, and reinterpreted. Kinsella (1997) notes that, in the West, "[r]eferences to Japan have become important signifiers of coolness in the packaging of youth culture." Japanese themes, or at least forms that portray such themes on the surface, can be seen in American science fiction, such as the film *Blade Runner* and William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, which have in turn gone on to influence Japanese science fiction (Napier 2001: 105-6). Thus, Japanese and American media forms are constantly examining and reflecting each other. This can also be seen in the increasing role of forms of Japanese popular culture in the United States. Japanese animation has been steadily increasing in popularity, the Japanese cooking game show *Iron Chef* has been running solidly on the Food Network, and Japanese bands such as L'Arc-en-Ciel and Puffy (re-christened Puffy Amiyumi for import) have recently released albums in the United States. This brings up an intriguing question: How is a cultural product of a particular media system to be interpreted when it is transplanted into a different culture?

The above examples of forms popular culture put forth by the media illustrate the ways in which meaning in the media, especially cross-cultural meaning, is problematic. In an analysis of the functioning of the mass media, we must ask if the role of the media is what we want it to be. The mass media is a powerful tool with which to shape public opinion, and especially in intercultural relations, it is difficult to argue against the weight of presentations in the media. Interpersonal relations are being formed and formulated by the impressions we receive in our everyday lives, based more on the media we consume than the people with whom we converse. Yet media and culture are liminal spaces through which we are potentially able to seize and reformulate the meaning of the symbols surrounding us.

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