Magical Group Realism：

Waterboys and *Swing Girls* as examples of Japanese Cinema and Culture

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I. Introduction

One of the most common types of comment I have heard about the students at my university when I talk with Americans who have visited Japan is how surprised they are at the media preferences of those students and of Japanese people in general. In part, they are surprised that these Japanese students, despite their easy access to Japanese animation and music, are so fond of American (primarily Disney) animation and (pop) music. Of course, these Americans are often far more interested in Japanese media—ranging from a fascination with anime to an interest in J-pop. Many of these people, then, are in the paradoxical situation of being interested more in the cultural artifacts produced by the other culture. There are a number of reasons why that might be so, of course, but this paper seeks to examine just one of them--and in doing so, talk about the difference in the two cultures.

One of the appeals of "foreign" entertainment is that it is not quite as normal and predictable as "domestic" entertainment. What we might call the commonplaces and tropes of the communication are different--and those differences mean that what may be commonplace to one culture seems fresh and interesting to another. Many of the students I have talked to love Disney because, in part, the stories have far happier endings than the traditional Japanese stories which form the backdrop for most Japanese animation—that is they contrast what they see as the "realism" of Japanese movies with the "fantasy" of Western ones. Similarly, the Americans are often surprised by the behavior of the actors in Japanese films as opposed to what they see as the "realism" of Western films.

II. Considering Collectivism and Individualism

So, what factors make Japanese entertainment different from Western entertainment? Well, one simple answer is the group focus. We are often told that Japan is a more collectivist society (group oriented) while the West is more individualist (self oriented). As a result, we could expect that the media produced in each culture would represent that kind of group or

self orientation. The division is not always so simple, of course. Not all Japanese think of themselves as group-oriented and not all Westerners think of them selves as individualists. In fact, David Matsumoto (2002) challenged the very notion of Japanese tendencies toward collectivism, claiming that temporal and cultural changes had made Japanese more individualistic than they had been in the past. After reviewing some research done on Japanese college students, he concluded:

> this [research] suggests that not only is the stereotype concerning Japanese collectivism not supported, but in fact the opposite may be true—the Japanese may actually be less collectivistic, that is, more individualistic than are Americans (41).

Now, I think that Matsumoto poses an interesting challenge to the widespread assumption of collectivism in Japan, but I also think that his research is missing the mark if it hopes to supplant that assumption. The notion that changing times would change the cultural assumptions of the Japanese themselves is well taken. Cultures, like people, adapt and change. Just because a culture values or enshrines a value in one part of its history does not mean that it will continue to do so.

However, there are several concerns which Matsumoto's response raises. The research he is examining (and conducting) assumes that, for example, being collectivist means that one will prefer collectivism—i.e. that self report data would accurately reflect what students would actually do (or that a zero-history task group would have status as an "in-group" to the students) in a real, un-staged situation. Both assumptions are, I think, mistakes because they confuse world view with desired outcome. I may hope for the best but know that the world will end badly. In that sense, I am a pessimist but I would appear an optimist in testing.

In a similar way, it seems to me that my students may often desire individualism while living out their lives in the cultural reality of collectivism. They may wish to live in a way that emphasizes their interests or goals over the goals of the whole of the group, but they still feel the assumptive cultural reality of the world which tells them that in-group goals are more important.

If performing direct, measurable observation is not the answer, what is? There are many opportunities for study, but what I want to examine for the moment is the idea of the culture bearer—that is the items which contain and transmit culture to the people inside and outside of that culture. One obvious culture bearer in the modern age is the movie. Movies convey narratives which must, at some level, make sense to the members of the society/culture. Movies might, then, provide a window into the unstated and (virtually) un-testable assumptions that a culture passes on to its members. In his discussion of the history of Japanese film, for example, Donald Richie (2001) noted that even though they do not intend to discuss the concept of being (culturally) Japanese, the movie makers invest in their movies the cultural assumptions they carry:

> though 'Japaneseness' is not a concept which ever much interested the
> Japanese filmmaker (though it has occasionally fascinated the Japanese
> politician), filmmakers remain Japanese, and the international language of film
> is even now locally spoken with a native accent (11).

This "native accent" is not at all surprising. Stories, narratives, movies rely on the audiences' abilities of making a coherent reality out of the strands of the text. These texts all rely on the audiences' ability to make the reality of the story fit meaningfully with the reality of their lived experiences. As a result, Kenneth Burke claimed that the purpose or function of poetic myth might lie in its ability to be more revealing of relationships in our world than direct, objective observations:

> A poet's myths, I tried to make clear, are *real* in the sense that they perform a
> necessary function. They so pattern the mind as to give it a grip upon reality.
> For the myth embodies a sense of relationships. But relationships cannot be
> pointed to, in the simple objective way in which you could point to a stone or a
> house. It is such a sense of *relationships* (I have sometimes called them
> "secondary reality") that I had in mind when I used the word "myth" (279).

In addition, as we interpret and strive to understand or make meaningful the stories and movies which we encounter, we may also experience stories or narratives which do not quite make sense—or which do not fit into our preconceived ideas about the world. That moment of viewing or reading can be delightful—it can open our eyes to new possibilities

and choices—or it can be frightening—as it reveals the sometimes shaky and idiosyncratic cultural underpinnings of the reality we live in. Either way, those moments of surprise and confusion may reveal to us the differences in cultural attitudes and assumptions in a kind of relief that objective study can not.

In essence, films may provide one meaningful way of examining the gaps in culture—those moments that are revealing by their breaks. In fact, I think that examining movies could be a particularly illustrative way to test Matsumoto's hypothesis. My students often tell me that they like American movies because they represent a fantasy—while Japanese films are too realistic. Of course, to each audience, reality is defined by the culture they are in. What makes a film strange or unusual to a member of another culture can reflect breaking points or points of dissimilarity in the cultural assumptions at play in the narrative. Indeed, as films force us to examine what is real or more than real about our interactions with one another and our environment, they—along with other forms of narrative account—may actually provide an easier way to examine attitudes and feelings about individualism and collectivism than quantitative measures.

III. Magical Realism

The connection between observable reality and cultural assumptions in fiction can be found in many places. One popular (and conscious) mingling of reality with cultural assumptions is "magical realism." This movement, often associated with Latin American writers is an attempt to seamlessly mix the real and the unreal. Beverly Omerod (1997) wrote that "magical realism is a literary technique that introduces unrealistic elements or incredible events, in a matter-of-fact way, into an apparently realistic narrative" (216). That is to say that the narrative in magical realism tries to make the magical elements of the story appear as though they are perfectly normal and natural.

In fact, these stories which mingle the fantastic or magical with the real or assumptive reality of day to day life can bring even closer to the forefront the assumptions of culture and society. Maggie Bowers (2004) claimed that magical realism depends more than other forms of narrative on the willingness of the audience to accept the strange and the magical elements of the story as part of the created reality of the story:

One of the unique features of magical realism is its reliance upon the reader to
follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realistic and magical
perspectives of reality on the same level. It relies on the full acceptance of the
veracity of the fiction during the reading experience, no matter how different
this perspective may be to the reader's non-reading opinions and judgments.
(Bowers 2004 4)

In essence, narratives which use some sense of magical realism must depend heavily
on the cultural assumptions of the audience. If some bit of fantasy seems too strange or
incongruent, it may throw the audience off—depriving them of their participation in the world
of the story. Happily, in the case of Japanese cinema, it would seem that a great deal of it is
aimed away from representation of reality. Richie argued that the impulse in Japanese films
comes from a desire to make nature into what it should be rather than the dangerous place it
is:

Such a will to dominate nature might then explain Japan's perhaps otherwise
puzzling lack of interest in realism as a style, and its corresponding lack of
respect—if that is the term—for reality itself. It might be argued that there is
no reality—that is, everything that we call by that name has really been
programmed somewhere down the line and hence has become something it was
not (253).

IV. Magical Group Realism

The specific form of Japanese magical realism, I will argue, has to do with the magical
power of the group. I have often been astounded at the willingness of my Japanese friends to
stand in long lines. One once told me that the long line was annoying but comforting. It
meant that the person waiting had made a good choice—the length of the line being a sign of
popularity and the popularity being a sign of quality. Groups wield an incredible amount of
power in the real Japan and they can exert even more power in the media of Japan.

In order to explain the power of groups, I am going to examine briefly three Japanese
films, *Water Boys* and *Swing Girls* by Yaguchi Shinobu and *Densha Otoko* by Murakami
Masanori. These three films and a few American counterparts should help explain the

predominance of magical group realism in Japanese movies and help demonstrate the continued importance of collectivism in Japanese society. In that sense, I am going to be engaging in a kind of self-ethnography—revealing where my reading of a movie bumps up against the cultural assumptions I bring with me. Though I am genetically half-Japanese, my cultural upbringing is much closer to the West (and I did engage in a limited form of reliability checking by discussing the films with other Westerners).

In the movie *Water Boys*, a group of young men join the swim club only to discover that the coach is a synchronized swimmer. Most of the boys leave the team. The remaining five members have to struggle to teach themselves how to do synchronized swimming. After a summer of effort and hard work, they finally begin to perform synchronized routines. Suddenly, the boys that quit the team return. They notice the attention the synchro team is getting and beg to be allowed back on the team. This is a key moment in the film. My expectation as a Western viewer was that the boys would be refused. These boys had quit the team. They had not been through the struggle of the summer. They had not bonded together cleaning at the aquarium. They lacked, in other words, every qualification for in-group membership. However, the "quitters" were allowed back onto the team and something magical happened. Without the training, without the effort, suddenly these new boys could also perform. They did their routine at a nearby school and are lauded (as a whole) for their efforts.

Virtually the same plot is replicated in *Swing Girls*. After food poisoning strikes almost the entire band, the group of students stuck in summer classes (who were responsible for the food poisoning), form a jazz band with the one healthy band member in an attempt to have some kind of band for the baseball team. After the school band recovers, the jazz band breaks up with only a few core members training to perform. The rest of the members scatter—finding part time jobs and spending their free time shopping (memorably working at the same store the band is performing in front of). At the last minute, the jazz band gets a chance to enter a music contest. Again, suddenly, the "quitters" return and are asked to rejoin the group. Again, they are accepted. Again, they magically gain the ability to perform and do so at the contest. Again, my instincts told me that the "quitters" should have been rejected. They did not dedicate themselves to the music or to the group. They did not struggle. They did not forge the bonds of friendship. And yet, somehow, as a unit they

were able to make good music.

Contrast these stories with a similar film from the United States, *The Bad News Bears*. In *The Bad News Bears*, a group of unskilled little league baseball players is humiliated by a rival team composed of the most skilled players in the league. Their coach recruits two "ringers"—skilled players to join the team: a young girl who can pitch very well and a tough, wild kid who is incredibly talented at batting and fielding. By adding these two members, the team is able to become strong enough to win—though the bad players remain bad players. The "magic" for these boys is that they get a lucky hit or catch at the right time, not that they become skillful. The key moments in the film are individual—Kelly, the young tough kid, finding the personal reasons to play; Morris, the coach, finding the incentive to clean up his act and devote himself to coaching.

In the film *Densha Otoko*, the main character (who is something of a nerd) tries to shed some of his social awkwardness and woo a more sophisticated woman. He seeks the help of others he knows only through the Internet to help him learn to be more sophisticated and tasteful. He corresponds regularly with seven other people but, at the critical moment, dozens of other people appear to encourage him. My initial reaction was that these extra people had no reason to appear. Their opinions and support should mean nothing to the densha otoko because they had no particular connection to him. However, cheered by their support, he goes on to woo Hermes, the sophisticated woman.

Contrast that story with *Napoleon Dynamite*, an American movie about a nerd who is trying to find his place in school and in a relationship. The main character befriends two other social misfits and they each strive to accomplish something in their lives. In the key moment of the film, Napoleon is trying to help his friend Pedro get elected class president. He goes out on to the stage and performs a strange dance as part of the talent contest. At the end of the dance, the audience applauds wildly, indicating that he has succeeded in winning them over to Pedro's side. Neither Pedro nor Deb (the love interest) attempts to convince Napoleon to do his dance. It is his idea and his decision.

V. Conclusions about Culture

Of course, the analysis done here is very limited and only begins to suggest the

possible directions and dimensions of future study, but each of the Japanese films examined was quite successful at the box office—indicating some degree of acceptance by the Japanese audience. In each case, as well, I could take the extra step of gathering together people from different cultures and attempting to do open ended interviews about their reactions—but I am not sure that there would be much added value. The fact is that the narrative of the films relies on a sense of community and collectivism which still far outstrips that found in the American films.

What, then, do these films teach us about Japanese culture?

I'm still not exactly sure, but they do show something fundamental about the differences between the cultures and the idea of groups. In the United States, a group may be formed, forged by common experience. Only through a bonding event can a group truly come together. As a result, "quitters" cannot possibly join—they are outside of the group and, having rejected the group before or during its formative stage, can never truly be members. They have not experienced the moment of group cohesion. They have not experienced the transcendent moment of groupness. In Japan, it would seem, groups are more the norm. One doesn't need to build a bond between the members of a group—one need only extend the bond. One does not need to transcend individuality to become a member of a group—one need only join.

In addition, groups in American movies function largely as collections of individuals. There is no hint in *The Bad News Bears* that the addition of Kelly and Amanda improves the other players—they improve the team but only by being good players. Similarly, there is no implication that Deb and Pedro help Napoleon Dynamite though his problems or his dance routine. They merely are the confederates who rejoice in his dance and benefit from it. In the Japanese films, it would seem that by becoming part of a group you become better than you are. None of the swimmers or jazz band members had any particular talent—and their training was poor, if memorable. And yet, by committing themselves to a common goal, the whole of the group became better.

I was fascinated to see the scene detailing the expansion of the group from *Water Boys* replicated in *Swing Girls* and even in the romantic comedy, *Densha Otoko*. Small groups that had been forged through effort and hard work were expanded at the key moment of each film

to easily include others who had not put in the effort or hard work.

Part of this research, then, suggests that Matsumoto is placing too much emphasis on the idea of in-groups and out-groups when considering the dynamics of collectivism and individualism. Matsumoto contends, for example, that "in supposedly collectivistic cultures such as Japan, individuals make large distinctions between ingroups and outgroups" (43). It seems, on the basis of the cultural artifacts examined here that while the distinctions may be (and certainly are) made, they are neither rigid nor easily definable. Matsumoto's finding that Japanese are relatively tolerant of strangers might be indicative of a number of things— from the assumption that a stranger is just an in-group member that hasn't joined to the cultural belief that one should treat those outside of the group with more kindness (even a distancing kindness) than one might treat those inside the group.

Many times, students have told me that they don't like studying films because they believe that films are made to be enjoyed not analyzed. To a certain extent, of course, those students are correct. The intention, as Richie contended earlier, was not to explore or explain "Japaneseness," but that doesn't mean that the movie can't be used in that fashion. Watching a movie can tell us about so much more than the plot and characters. A movie can tell us what kinds of things a culture expects and believes. When you find a moment in a movie that surprises you, pay attention! This moment is the one where you have been shown a window into another culture.

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