

TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

Teaching Japanese Popular Culture

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Japanese popular culture has arrived on American college campuses as never before. Student interest in Japanese manga (comic books), anime (animated films and television shows), and video games drives much of the enrollment in Japanese courses and Japanese majors and minors. In response to student interest, as well as the establishment of popular culture as a topic of serious academic scholarship, the demand for courses on Japanese popular culture has never been higher. Yet the number of scholars specializing in the study of popular culture is still relatively small. This can potentially create problems, as faculty teach outside their expertise, and perhaps face an uncomfortable situation in which the students know more about the topic than the professor. In this article, I will offer some suggestions and advice for faculty creating a popular culture course for the first time, based on my experiences teaching undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame. The course I developed reflects my background in Japanese literature and film, and is but one example of many possible approaches to the topic. The sample syllabus and list of resources at the end of this article provide citations for all text and media sources mentioned.

Negotiating the Study of Popular Culture and Classical Literature

While the study of popular culture can and should encompass all fields in the humanities, professors of Japanese literature in particular seem to be frequently called upon to teach a course in manga, anime or film, or to incorporate those elements into existing courses. One common response is to create a course using anime or film adaptations of classic literature, such as the

anime *Tale of Genji*, but this approach does a disservice to both the students and the field. First, students may resent deceptive course descriptions, when they discover the course they expected on anime is in fact a course on classical literature. Second, the adaptations of classic literature will nearly always pale in comparison to the original, and the only lesson students will have learned is that the anime *Tale of Genji* is not that good. Showing a film adaptation in class is not the same as teaching students film theory and history. Popular culture texts like manga, anime, and film have their own histories and classics, which reward careful study. Moreover, as popular culture texts were created under different circumstances than those of highbrow literature, the analytic approach must also be different. The close reading of theme and character development appropriate to a literature course will either be dissatisfying with texts that are too simple, or will drive the content towards dense texts that are not necessarily representative of manga or anime genres as a whole. Finally, popular culture ought to be taught as a discrete field, with its own theories and praxis, and not simply as a pale imitation of high culture. While popular culture can and should be taught with various disciplinary approaches, my emphasis here reflects my background in literary and film studies, although I hope my suggestions will be of interest to those in other fields as well.

One of the first problems in designing an introductory course on Japanese popular culture is breadth: there are simply too many aspects to popular culture to cover in one semester. In my course, I limit the scope to narrative fiction, with an emphasis on formal and genre analysis, with units on novels, live action film, animation, and manga, but not music, video games, sports, martial arts, non-fiction television (such as game shows), and fashion, among other topics. Once relieved of the pressure to include every aspect of popular culture in a single course, I was free to explore each topic in more depth, rather than cover many topics superficially. This increased the intellectual challenge for the students as well. My approach provides a framework for the syllabus, which is divided into sections by medium, and allows for comparison of different genres across media. This approach also leads to an emphasis on formal

analysis, which is a concrete skill set students can learn in one semester.

Although it may appear to us as faculty that students are only interested in pop culture and disdain high culture, I have found that within a classroom setting, the opposite is often true. When teaching a survey of modern Japanese literature, my students readily embraced classics such as *Kokoro*, but when I included lighter fare such as *Irozange (Confessions of Love)* by Uno Chiyo), they found it shallow and silly. Many students have been conditioned by high school and college literature courses to expect to read dense, “writerly” novels, and to spend class time unpacking their meaning. When faced with a novel or other text in which the meaning or symbolism is obvious, they are unsure as to how to react. For this reason, I begin the popular culture course with two novels, to highlight the difference between high culture and pop culture. The first novel, *Norwegian Wood* by Murakami Haruki, encompasses both “pure literature” (*junbungaku*) and pop culture; although it is more dense and reflective than most popular fare, it was also a media sensation when it was first published, and allows for discussion of the difference between highbrow and lowbrow entertainment, as well as how a mass culture phenomenon can exceed the content of the original text. The second book, *All She Was Worth* by Miyabe Miyuki, is clearly genre fiction. In this case, students read a detective novel that is a good introduction to the use of genre rather than symbolism or characterization, to analyze a work of fiction. Starting with these two novels allows students to see how analysis of popular culture is different from “great books” courses they may have had in high school or college.

Even with a focus on narrative and genre, teaching each medium has its own challenges. First, in regard to teaching film, technical issues around screening material are significant. In order to maximize class time, all screenings must take place outside class hours. In classes where I show more than a few films, I schedule a weekly two hour screening time that is mandatory for all students and constitutes part of their attendance grade. Even with a mandatory viewing section, however, students need access to the films or TV shows for

repeat viewings, which should be encouraged when they are writing papers or studying for exams. Many universities have technical support to allow online streaming of video content, although uploading a two hour film can take some time and should be planned in advance. Students should also have access to a DVD through the school library, although having only one DVD for a large class, even with restricted lending hours, can cause a bottleneck. It's also important to realize the default setting of most anime DVDs is for dubbing rather than subtitles, and some students may hear a significantly altered script from the original unless they are specifically instructed to watch the subtitled version.

Analyzing Film and Television

Regarding theoretical approaches to teaching film, some universities with film departments offer tutorials for faculty in other fields on incorporating film into their classes. Consulting or collaborating with film studies faculty can be helpful in course design and pedagogy. The Society for Cinema and Media Studies has a section on its website devoted to teaching resources, including teaching film across the curriculum (<http://www.cmstudies.org>). When teaching film, I emphasize formal analysis and use of film terms. Students can learn these terms relatively easily; as they have been watching films all their lives, the concepts are familiar to them, even if they did not know the technical vocabulary. I chose not to use a film textbook in my popular culture course, in order to limit reading material, but in a different course I have used the textbook *Looking at Movies*. Although the book mainly uses examples from American and European film, it has very clear explanations with copious illustrations from recent films, and a DVD supplement with good example clips. If a textbook is not used, one alternative is handouts with lists of film terms, as well as a website supported by Yale University giving descriptions and examples of those terms (<http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>). YouTube also has many good clips illustrating film terms. A key word search for “shot-reverse-shot,” for example, will turn up short tutorials made for aspiring filmmakers that can be useful for teaching.

As a part of the emphasis on formal analysis of film, the first written assignment in the course is a shot analysis. Students choose one short sequence (usually one to three minutes) and discuss all the formal elements they notice, such as shot duration, distance from the camera, *mise-en-scene*, editing, or sound, using the technical vocabulary they have learned, in an essay format. The paper must contain analysis as well as description, that is, not merely stating that the lighting is subdued or each shot is very long, but explaining why it is so, and how it adds to our understanding of both that scene and the film as a whole. This is a standard assignment in a film studies course, and allows students to reflect on the artistic choices made by the director and crew, as well as the narrative capacity of film as a medium.

Although television and film may look superficially similar, they have different modes of production and consumption that significantly impact the content. I emphasize how viewing environments and filming practices differ between television and film. Teaching television, however, is more difficult than teaching film, because there are few Japanese TV shows available with subtitles, and many series are prohibitively long. Some Japanese TV shows are available on the internet with subtitles, but in most cases these are in violation of copyright and may be taken down without notice. Even when a drama series is available, the narrative arc usually takes an entire season to unfold, making one episode relatively meaningless, and unless the syllabus is designed to allow discussion of one series over several weeks, it is unrealistic to expect students to watch the entire series. In this class, I have chosen to focus only on TV shows that are purely episodic, or that are collected in two hour digest format (which is common with anime).

Teaching Animation

Teaching animation is challenging because there are few secondary sources on animation studies, particularly in English on Japanese animation, written for an academic rather than a general readership. Again I focus on formal analysis, limited vs. full animation, and superflat theory, although this is admittedly challenging for undergraduates, and may not be appropriate for

all course levels. Any discussion of animation, however, should begin with a description of how hand-drawn cel animation was traditionally made. Although much anime is now created using computer imaging, it is still made to mimic the look of cel animation. Many students are unaware of how the process works, or even how it differs from live action (a student once asked me if the voices were recorded simultaneously as the animator draws). How-to books for aspiring animators can be good sources of basic technical information.

Regarding the history of anime, many early examples are available on DVD, although frustratingly, many are only available in the U.S. in heavily edited, dubbed versions, particularly *Tetsuwan Atomu (Astro Boy)*, *Tetsujin 28 (Gigantor)*, and *Mach Go Go Go (Speed Racer)*. For this reason, I only show brief scenes from these shows, focusing on the animation, rather than the story. The new DVD set *The Roots of Japanese Anime* collects prewar films, which provides a good comparison to the standardized look of recent commercial anime, and can prompt key questions on the definition of anime: is it a medium? An aesthetic style? A genre? Can all animation produced in Japan be classified as anime?

Teaching anime also brings up many of the same issues as live action because animation is produced for both film and television. While it is tempting to show only feature films, particularly the more sophisticated work by Miyazaki Hayao, Studio Ghibli is not representative of anime as a whole; in fact Miyazaki himself resists the use of the term anime, in order to make a generic and aesthetic distinction between his work and the mainstream animation industry. Any course including in-depth study of anime should include TV anime, although it can be difficult to show a very long and convoluted story arc in a limited time. I have compromised by showing film digest versions of two foundational anime TV series, *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *Galaxy Express 999*, while explaining to students that these are abridged revisions of the original story, and in some scenes the animation has been altered. Although this is not an ideal solution, the film versions of anime TV shows are frequently given a wide theatrical release in Japan and serve to increase the fan base, so there is a case to be made for viewing these as

authentic texts. In the case of *Evangelion*, I chose to use four episodes of the original TV series rather than the film versions, focusing on form and only a few aspects of the story.

Manga

Finally, teaching manga is perhaps even more challenging than anime. There is very little academic writing in English on manga or the comic book format in general. Like television, most manga stories are long, unfolding over many volumes. Although students can read each volume quickly, requiring them to purchase multiple volumes can be quite expensive. For the most part, I limit readings to one-volume stories or episodic series. An even bigger problem for teaching the history of manga is that while English translations have gained a large market in the U.S., for the most part, only the most recent series have been translated commercially, leaving almost the entire corpus of foundational works untranslated. Some of the most popular and influential manga artists are wholly unavailable in English, such as Mizuki Shigeru and Ikeda Riyoko. One exception is Tezuka Osamu, many of whose major works have been published in English, but the translation of *Atomu* (*Astro Boy*, published by Dark Horse) is piecemeal and not in order of original publication. Another exception is Tatsumi Yoshihiro, whose autobiography, *A Drifting Life*, provides a glimpse into the birth of the manga industry in the 1950s. As with anime, a vast quantity of manga, including older titles, is available on the internet with fan-produced translations (scanlation). The quality of scanlations varies widely, from unintelligible (sometimes produced by non-native speakers based on scanlations in other languages) to professional (in some cases, better than the commercial release), but again most of these sites are in violation of copyright and subject to removal.

As with anime and animation, the study of manga and comic books as a medium is still in its infancy. I use Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics*, an introduction to the American comic book medium and visual storytelling written in comic book format. His theories on transitions between panels are one possible approach to formal analysis of manga, analogous to editing techniques in film. McCloud compares transitions in

American and European comic books with Japanese manga; although his knowledge of manga is extremely limited, it is useful for guiding class discussion. However, his theories, as with any developing field, are incomplete and not wholly applicable to manga; for this reason it is best introduced to students as experimental and conditional, not as an established system. Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*, recently translated from French, is another possibility for a theoretical foundation to the study of visual narrative.

The Otaku (Obsessive Fan)

Another difficulty in teaching manga and anime in college courses is the otaku, or the obsessive fan. Students who are fans of manga or anime can contribute positively to the class, by bringing a breadth of knowledge that other students lack. However, as the term otaku implies, some level of social dysfunction is not uncommon among hardcore fans, and some otaku can potentially be disruptive to the class. Aside from serious personality disorders, which should be dealt with outside class, I have found disruptive otaku behavior falls into two categories: 1. challenging the authority of the teacher and 2. resistance to academic analysis of the material. Regarding the first problem, simply acknowledging a student's expertise can help to reduce conflict. A hallmark of otaku behavior is obsessive collection and databasing of facts: mastery of a vast amount of information is a source of pride. A simple, casual comment from the instructor recognizing that knowledge can prevent the student from feeling the need to show off. Pushy behavior from an otaku student, attempting to usurp authority from the instructor, often stems from a desire to share their beloved movie or TV show with the rest of the class, and frustration that the course does not cover their cherished topic. For this reason, I assign all students to give one 5 minute oral presentation in front of the class on a topic of their choosing. Giving the otaku the chance to actually teach the class, if only for a few minutes, and allowing them to share their passion and receive acknowledgement of their expertise, greatly reduces this frustration and channels their excitement in a productive direction. This assignment also has the benefit of encouraging

students without much background in the topic to watch or read material in addition to class assignments. Listening to a wide variety of presentations also increases all students' knowledge of the field.

Regarding the second category of problematic otaku behavior, they often approach the material as fans, rather than as academics. Students, however, are not always aware that this is a problem; they need to be reminded of the difference between a fan and an academic approach. One way to do this is to have the students brainstorm the difference between these two approaches: the fan is not analytic, but focused on details (trivia such as continuity, schematics, or mythology) and affective responses (“Worst Episode Ever!”), and may be highly critical among themselves, but fiercely protective when dealing with outsiders. On the other hand, an academic approach demands an objective, rational tone, and a coherent argument, not just an accretion of details. The two are not incompatible; some of the best academic writing has been done by scholars who are also fans of their chosen material, and it is important not to disparage the fans. But constant reminders of the difference between a fan and an academic approach give students a guideline for the appropriate way to participate in class discussions and complete oral and written assignments. I also touch on the otaku as a topic in the syllabus, and encourage the students to reflect on their own experiences as fans, even if they do not self-identify as otaku. Again, this acknowledges the importance of otaku to manga and anime markets, but also encourages students to think critically about themselves and their own engagement with popular culture.

Not all students in a popular culture class are knowledgeable fans, however. I have found that many students have only the slightest familiarity with the topic, perhaps having only seen one or two anime TV shows or played a Japanese video game. These students can easily be put off if otaku students are allowed to be disruptive or intimidating in class, so it is important to curtail that behavior. It is also not uncommon to have students with no knowledge at all of Japan or Japanese pop culture, so it is important to explain things carefully and not to assume background knowledge of the history or language. Even for

students who are not fans, learning how to analyze popular culture texts is an important skill. As we all live in a media-saturated environment, students should learn how to consume that media with a critical eye, not only from Japan but from their own cultures as well.

Although there are many challenges in creating a new course on Japanese popular culture, it can be a rewarding experience to channel students' interests toward academic analysis, and encourage them to view popular media critically. Being aware of some of the challenges in advance, and building a course that incorporates the instructor's research interests should help instructors to succeed.

Sample Syllabus

Week 1: Novel—Highbrow/Popular Fiction

Murakami Haruki. *Norwegian Wood*. Trans. Jay Rubin. Vintage, 2000.

Week 2: Novel—Crime

Miyabe Miyuki. *All She Was Worth*. Trans. Alfred Birnbaum. Mariner Books, 1999.

Week 3: Live Action Film—Crime

Stray Dog, Kurosawa Akira, 1949.

Film terms on Yale Film Analysis website: <http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>

Richie, Donald. "Stray Dog." *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1965. 58-64.

Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro. "Stray Dog." *Kurosawa*. Duke UP, 2000. 158-165; 171-178.

Week 4: Live Action Film—Jidaigeki

Lady Snowblood, Fujita Toshiya, 1973.

Anderson, J.L. "Japanese Swordfighters and American Gunfighters." *Cinema Journal* 12.2 (Spring 1973): 1-21.

Standish, Isolde. *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*. New York: Continuum, 2005. 287-293; 308-314.

Week 5: Live Action Film—Science Fiction

Casshern, Kiriya Kazuaki, 2004.

Abbott, Stacey. "Final Frontiers: Computer-Generated Imagery and the Science Fiction Film." *Science Fiction Studies* 33.1 (2006): 89-108.

Masahiro Mori. "The Uncanny Valley." Trans. Karl F. MacDorman and Takashi Minato. *Energy*, 7(4), 1970. 33-35.

Williams, Peter and David Wallace. *Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II*. New York: The Free Press, 1989. 31-50.

Week 6: TV—Tokusatsu

Ultraman Tsuburaya Eiji, 1966; episodes 2 and 14

Gill, Tom. "Transformational Magic: Some Japanese Superheroes and Monsters." *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*. Ed. D.P. Martinez. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998. 33-55.

Ragone, August. "Hero from the Stars: The Creation of Ultraman." *Eiji Tsuburaya: Master of Monsters*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007. 113-129.

Week 7: TV—Anime

Galaxy Express 999, Matsumoto Reiji, 1979 (film version dir. Rintaro)

Poitras, Gilles. "Contemporary Anime in Japanese Pop Culture." *Japanese Visual Culture*. Ed. Mark MacWilliams. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008. 48-67.

Chi Hang Li et. al. *The Complete Guide to Anime Techniques*. New York: Barron's, 2006. (selections).

Murakami Takashi. "Super Flat Manifesto" and "A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art." *Superflat*. Tokyo: Madra, 2000. 5-25.

Week 8: Film—Anime

Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind, Miyazaki Hayao, 1984.

Lamarre, Thomas. "From Animation to Anime: Drawing

Movements and Moving Drawings.” *Japan Forum* 14 (2) 2002: 348-365.

Lamarre, Thomas. “The Multiplanar Image.” *Mechademia* 1: 2006. 120-143.

Week 9: TV—Anime

Mobile Suit Gundam, Tomino Yoshiyuki, 1979; film version David Vernal, “War and Peace in Japanese Science Fiction Animation: An Examination of *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *The Mobile Police Patlabor*.” *Animation Journal*. (Fall 1995): 56-84.

Kinsella, Sharon. “Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement.” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 24: 2 (Summer 1998) 289-316. (excerpts)

Week 10: TV—Anime

Neon Genesis Evangelion, Anno Hideaki, 1995: episodes 9, 16, 25, 26

Ortega, Mariana. “My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.” *Mechademia 2: Networks of Desire*: 2006. 216-232.

Lamarre, Thomas. “Introduction to the Otaku Movement.” *EnterText* 4.1 (Winter 2004/05). 155-163.

Azuma Hiroki. “The Animalization of Otaku Culture.” *Mechademia 2: Networks of Desire*: 2006. 175-187.

Week 11: Story—Manga

Tezuka Osamu, *Metropolis*. Dark Horse, 2003.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. 24-45; 60-80.

Makela, Lee. “From *Metropolis* to *Metropolisu*: The Changing Role of the Robot in Japanese and Western Cinema.” *Japanese Visual Culture*. Ed. Mark MacWilliams. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008. 91-113.

Week 12: Gekiga

Tatsumi Yoshihiro. “My Hitler.” *The Push Man and Other Stories*. Ed. Adrian Tomine. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2005. 179-202.

- . “Abandon the Old in Tokyo.” *Abandon the Old in Tokyo*.
Ed. Adrian Tomine. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux,
2006. 37-67.
- Tsuge Yoshiharu. “Screw-Style.” *Comics Journal*. 250 (Feb
2003): 136-157.

Week 13: Shojo—Manga

- Yazawa Ai. *Nana* Vol. 2. VIZ Media, 2006.
- Moto Hagio. “X + Y.” A, A’. Trans. Matt Thorn. San Francisco:
Viz Media, 1997.
- Takahashi Mizuki. “Opening the Closed World of ShM’jo
Manga.” *Japanese Visual Culture*. Ed. Mark MacWilliams.
New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008. 114-136.
- McLelland, Mark. “Why are Japanese Girls’ Comics Full of
Boys Bonking?” *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment
Media*. 4 Dec 2006.

Week 14: Gekiga

- Koike Kazuo and Kojima Goseki, *Lone Wolf & Cub* vol. 1.
Dark Horse, 2000.
- Ch. 1 “Son for Hire, Sword for Hire”
- Ch. 6 “Waiting for the Rains”
- Ch. 7 “Eight Gates of Deceit”
- Ch. 9 “The Assassin’s Road”

Week 15: Horror—Manga

- Hino Hideshi, *Hell Baby*. Blast Books, 1995.
- Pandey, Rajyashree. “Medieval Genealogies of Manga and
Anime Horror.” *Japanese Visual Culture*. Ed. Mark
MacWilliams. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008. 219-236.

Additional Resources

- The Roots of Japanese Anime DVD [http://
www.zakkafilms.com/](http://www.zakkafilms.com/)
- The Society for Cinema and Media Studies Teaching Resources
[http://www.cmstudies.org/index.php?option=com_
weblinks&catid=13&Itemid=23](http://www.cmstudies.org/index.php?option=com_weblinks&catid=13&Itemid=23)
- Azuma Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*. Trans.
Jonathan Abel and Kono Shion. U of Minnesota Press, 2009.

- Barsam, Richard. *Looking at Movies*. 2nd Ed. W. W. Norton & Co., 2006.
- Groensteen, Theiry. *The System of Comics*. Trans Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: U Press of Mississippi, 2007.
- Kinsella, Sharon. *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society*. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i Press, 2000.
- Lamarre, Thomas. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Power, Natsu Onoda. *God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post-World War II Manga*. Jackson: U Press of Mississippi, 2009.
- Tatsumi Yoshihiro. *A Drifting Life*. Trans. Taro Nettleton. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2009.