Alexander H. Dacuyan

JAPN 314: JPN Visual Culture & Media

Analysis of Japanese Visual Culture

After watching the movie "Departures" for the second time, it is easier to understand what the movie conveys because there are many situations and details that help inform the audience to feel a certain way to a certain degree. These situations and details help define the culture of Japanese perspectives on life and death, which will be discussed first. Second is how this movie makes us think about the meaning of life, especially from my own point of view, which will be supported by examples from the movie. Last is the Japanese culture in general and how the film helps represent much of the culture that is seen today and from the past. Although the movie seems to be of a sad story, in my perspective it is a story to show a rebirth in human nature with a very positive outcome. But the Japanese perspective might be a little different.

First, the movie makes us believe that when someone dies in the family that the importance of the way the deceased is handled should be with care and kindness. The ability to do this by a professional seems to be very sacred to both parties. But at the same time the profession can be looked at as an unclean job with many uneasy assumptions of the people. This is easily shown when the main character job is revealed to his long-time friend and his wife. Both his wife and friend did not respect him for the work he was doing which seems to be a deep rooted emotion in the Japanese psyche. Once they realized first hand and saw how his profession was a sacred art in making people's lives better, then they began to come to terms of understanding.

The Japanese seem quick to adhere to a common way of thinking collectively mainly because maybe they have not been brought up in an individualists society. So they follow the norm or just go with the flow without having to deal with issues that can cause sensitivity or confliction within themselves.

Another example of Japanese perception is the way the deceased is felt through emotion. In the movie, all of the scenes of the funerals are sad but there seems to be a lack of real emotion, or better yet, a lack of extreme emotion. This seems to show that the Japanese have obvious feelings for death but they also have an innate ability to deal with it along with appreciating life more, better than a western point of view. This is shown by the way the deceased is put to rest. It is like they are going on a final journey, looking there best from when they were alive and all the misunderstandings they might have done are all forgiven by their loved ones.

Two scenes in particular show this with great feeling. The first is where the father is upset that his son wanted to be a girl then died. His first reaction was anger and animosity but after understanding the truth he realized he loved his son no matter what he looked like. Even though the parents had a conflict with each other they were able to resolve their differences and move on knowing their son was departed with the look of who he was. The second scene is the most climactic of the film. The main character is with his deceased father whom he hasn't seen in 30 years and he realizes that his father loved him for all those years. Both men forgive their own thoughts of animosity and better understand their loved ones. It is like saying, "I now understand the truth behind your actions and I except it. I also know now that I was wrong to think differently and I hope you have forgiveness. I will always love you." This statement is something that is definitely ingrained in all of us, but some people don't know how to express it which leads to my own ideals.

Second, is the understanding of life and death from my point of view which is somewhat similar to what has been discussed above. I find that life is just one part of an endless journey and death is just a means to a new beginning. Our western view of death seems to be extremely traumatic for most people but in comparison, the Japanese have delt with death on a much grander scale just due to their incredible history. The film shows a beautiful way for someone to depart the earth and the same tradition should be practiced here too. We should not be afraid of life or death. Life is finite and death is inevitable so in reality we should enjoy every moment of every day without ego or materialistic influences. There really is no place in our lives to feel angry or bitter or selfish because we have control of our own feelings and why should we make ourselves feel that way. This ideal is very similar to the Buddhism which is a huge integral part of japan.

In the movie the characters learn to respect one another because of life and death. The main character adapts to his situation and learns quickly about his own truth and to see things how they are. He becomes very humble and is finally not afraid of his life. This ideal is something that everyone can benefit from even if it's in a movie.

I have many experiences of loved ones departing. At my age now, everyone is much older and is just barley standing on the precipice of life and death. But I have learned to accept death in a way that exemplifies one's life. It's not about what a deceased person leaves behind or wealth accrued but the individual themselves and what there life meant to me. It is still difficult to deal with death but I believe that it is because we have been conditioned to deal with it like everyone else in our society. If the U.S. had a very long history with a lot of heritage, death would probably be viewed very differently from today.

The meaning of life itself is pretty simple once a person opens up their mind to see a bigger picture than what has been forced upon them. This is not easy to do, but I believe the meaning of life is to learn, to constantly learn. Learning is the path in which we as a human can better understand life. Without learning things go terribly wrong. This concept seems to be valued very much within the Japanese and Asian culture. Although the west is fairly new to Japanese philosophies, religions, and culture, there are a few of us that want to really understand the spirit of Japan.

Finally, what I have learned about Japanese culture is invaluable to me. There is so much to discuss it is hard to put into words. Mostly, the Japanese way of life and how thousands of years of tradition and culture are still integrated with their society today blows me away. It is amazing the relationship with the people and nature seems to be a staple of their culture which is something I really care about.

Another aspect of the culture is the collectivism which is ideally the smart route to go. With individualism, we tend to be selfish and unhelpful, but for the Japanese it completely opposite. It is almost like the philosophy of Star Trek, "Work together to better the whole of mankind instead of destroying each other." This concept calls out to me as if it were common sense that everyone should know. It is still understandable that there are issues with certain ideals but Japanese way of life has a process that fits to my understanding very well.

Even the small nuances in Japanese culture have a big impact on how they are perceived. For example, the bow, it is a simple gesture but means so much. The tea ceremony and how it socially brings people together with respect and humbleness. The architecture, like shoji doors and tatami, are genius products that are efficient yet simple and cultural.

All of things together are possible because of a long history and Japanese heritage which should survive like many of the Asian cultures. Although the film "Departures" has many aspects of what has been discussed, I strongly believe that many movies or visual media from Japan can tell us a lot about the culture, their perspectives of life and death, and their way of life.