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Buddhism in Film and Anime

In many ways media is used to inform, teach and educate the masses. Buddhism or Buddhist themes are explored in various types of media. For example in film and animation Buddhist themes are used to strengthen a plot. In film or movies Buddhist themes are sometimes used as a part of the conflict that the protagonist must overcome. Or in animated television or shows Buddhist themes are used in a more supernatural way. The themes are displayed in Japanese societal or cultural perspective. The themes express what is thought to be true versus what is actually thought.

An example of Buddhist themes in anime is “Haunted Junction”. The anime is about a high school that is being plagued by spirits. Three leaders of the school’s Holy Student Council are brought together to defend the school from evil spirits. The three leaders have various religious backgrounds. The president of the school has the background of being the son of a Christian Minister; the second leader is a daughter of a Shrine priest while the last leader is the grandson of a Buddhist monk. Together they use their abilities and the help of good spirits to exercise the school of evil spirits. The genre of the anime is comedy and there are only twelve episodes to the series.

This anime doesn't display Buddhism very well. The character with the Buddhist background is shown as a teenager obsessed with girls and is susceptible to being possessed. In every episode there is an evil spirit that attacks the school and the main characters exercise the spirit. The show doesn't really touch on aspects of Buddhism such as nirvana, karma, or Buddha. The show focuses on comedy and playful banter between the characters and getting rid of the bad guy.

In a Pop-culture sense this anime shows the perspective of what people think about what these religions are. In the anime the show is about people involved in religious practices having powers and using those powers to fight evil spirits. The purpose of religion is usually to give people hope that there is a high being or beings looking over them. Religion can't solve the problems of the world or make the world better physically but it can give people strength with the power of their beliefs.

This anime doesn't educate anyone on religion. By watching this show no one can know or learn about the religious teachings of Shinto, Christianity, or Buddhism. After watching an episode of this show I wasn't able to understand anything about Buddhism. The show uses aspects of these religions only to create the main characters and to create a conflict and resolution for each episode of the show. The religious themes aren't really expressed accurately. There are the typical costumes for each character such as a robe for the Shinto priestess, a wooden beaded bracelet for the Buddhist monk and a cross for the Minister's son. And all of the characters reside at typical places of worship in relation to their character. For example, the Minister's son lives at a church, the priestess lives near the shrine and the monk at the temple. The show is fulfilling its purpose as entertainment and not as a cultural learning tool.

An example of Buddhist themes in film is the segment of Hoichi the Earless from “Kwaidan” directed by Masaki Kobayashi. The main character Hoichi is a man residing at a Buddhist temple. Being blind he is lured by spirit to a grave site to perform for a royal family. He plays the musical instrument biwa and chants about a battle between two clans. The Buddhist temple was near the site of the battle so the spirits who haven’t rested linger around the temple. Hoichi made a promise to the ghosts that he would perform for them every night. To prevent Hoichi from interacting with the ghosts a spell is written all over his body so the ghosts can’t see him. The spell wasn’t written on his ears and so for breaking his promise his ears were ripped off by the ghost.

The story of Hoichi the Earless is famous from Japanese mythology. The story however is intertwined with Japanese history and culture. The tale of the famous battle between the Japanese clans is accompanied by the music of the biwa instrument. But from the folklore perspective Buddhism plays a supernatural role. The only things Buddhist related about this movie are that there is a Buddhist temple, some monks, and some spirits that can’t move on to nirvana. But these aspects of Buddhism are important because they create the plot and the conflict of the story.

The purpose of the film “Kwaidan” as a whole is to tell ghost stories from mythology. Mythology is often connected to religious practices. Most myths are considered true stories from the past; a story that tells a true account relating to religion with a moral to end the story. Myths are similar to legends and many consider the stories of Kwaidan to be legends. As for the story about Hoichi the Earless it tells a story about history in a supernatural way with a moral to the story. Although the Buddhist aspects of the film are used as entertainment tools they help in many ways in displaying the story.

Another example in film is “Departures” directed by Takita Youjiro; this is a more recent film with Buddhist themes. It does contain some other modern cultural essences as well as social issues that are very old in Japan. The whole film is about the process of conducting a funeral or mourning ceremony also known as a wake. The main characters are morticians or Noukansha and they prepare the deceased for the coffin. This process is performed in front of the family and loved ones of the deceased. Although not considered by many people this is an art of Buddhist morticians.

The main characters as morticians have to settle and take care of the body in front of the grieving loved ones; this process is called Noukan. In the several scenes of preparing the body for the coffin the deceased is getting ready for samsara (a concept of Buddhism) or the process of going through the six realms to reach the 7th realm of nirvana. The body is usually dressed in a white kimono; six coins are also placed in the coffin with the body. The six coins represent the belief that the deceased will cross the Sanzu River. The body is also placed in the coffin so the head is facing the north or the west which represents a realm in Amida Buddha.

From a societal perspective this is a social issue that has been around since the early centuries of Japan. The people who dealt with corpses were looked down upon, shunned and their status was considered low in the social ladder. Some people in the present day still feel this way. After the process is performed the families and loved ones feel grateful to them for sending the deceased off after they have passed on. This film teaches that this type of ignorance that still present in Japan today; by watching this movie many people, not just in Japan, can learn about and appreciate this process. People can also learn about an often overlooked social issue that is still present in Japan.

I have yet to find a good representation of Buddhism in film. The films that I have talked about in this essay focus more on the characters, their development, the storyline and conflict rather than the religion itself. The media can educate people about Buddhism in many different ways. Anime can display a playful and comedic side of Buddhism. Film can display Buddhism through social problems. Or the media can display this religion and way of life through a mythological and historical perspective.