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In the world today, prejudice runs rampant and robs many people the chance of actually being human. People are discriminated against just for having a certain skin color or being a certain sex. Why does this happen? Why do we discriminate against others? I believe that this is all part of the “othering” process that we as humans partake in to gain understanding.

The process of “othering,” the process of classifying others as distinctly different from yourself, is something that seems to be innate to human nature. We categorize in order to understand. By distinguishing between self and other humans create autonomy which helps in forming identity to better relate to the world around us. Unfortunately, this process can cause significant damage if it progresses to prejudice formation. In this essay, I will explore the messages of “othering” that are reinforced in popular anime.

“Othering”

You may be asking yourself what this “othering” process really is, and does it really cause that much damage to society. How could a process of classification cause so much damage? It seems to be natural to humanity to distinguish between self and other. Humans are perpetually perceiving differences and then acting on those by treating others as different. (Culea, 95) This essay will be particularly looking at how “othering” damages society by implementing prejudices against certain “others” that in turn leads to discrimination. This is a grave problem that the world is facing today. “Negative stereotyping is a form of ‘othering’ which fractures individuality and reduces human features to simplified representations.” (Culea, 95) Whether it is students being shot because they are Muslims, people being discriminated against because of skin color, or people being looked down upon because they belong to a lower social class. Stereotypes are placed on groups of people to help identify differences between them and us. The problem happens when those stereotypes become all a person is judged with.

The “us versus them” mentality has so worked its way into the thinking of society that it is impossible to think outside of those binaries. If we are honest with ourselves, it is evident that we place this binary thinking on groups of people to make sure that we are never part of the “other.” We see black and white, women and men, educated and uneducated, Christian and Muslim, lazy and hardworking. (Culea, 95) These binaries lock us into an ill perception of the “other” just because they “other” seems to be directly opposing us. The “other” is the antithesis to us. The “other” threatens existence because it questions the power of the dominant group. “The ‘other’ is thus perceived as being different from the perspective of a dominant group that establishes the norm. Moreover, “such binaries of difference usually involve a relationship of power, of inclusion and exclusion, in that one of the pair is empowered with a positive identity and the other side of the equation becomes the subordinated “Other”” (Culea, 95)

Society reeks of this “othering” that discriminates, subjugates, and only breeds hatred among people. As aforementioned, this is not a new concept. Humanity has been participating in this practice since the beginning of human existence. Despite the evils that come with “othering,” is it as bad as it is made out to be? After all this process allows humans to create identity. By creating identity, humans then have the chance to become part of a group that their identity coincides with. (Dervin, 4) At this point it has become evident that this “othering” process has caused great harm to society. Now that there is an awareness of it, how is it stopped? By analyzing different cultural artifacts I propose there is an answer to that question.

Neo-Marxist Critical Perspective

The critical perspective is a recent development that spawned out of the fall of modernism and the rise of post-modern thinking. Postmodernism came to be when the enlightenment mindset started to fade out of societies understanding of the world. Modernism was deep in the ideology that society was unified and stable, that there is empirical truth to be known, and all structures can be reduced into simple systems. Postmodern thinkers observed the world and gathered that society did not operate in this way. Postmodern thinking is characterized by multiplicity, fragmentation and plurality. (Simcox, ppt. 4) The critical perspective was a tool that was created to analyze this post-modern society.

Traditional perspective used to make sense of the world were not applicable in this new society because they operate to break society into knowable systems with knowable Truth. They ask they question why something is. The Critical perspective does not ask why something is but asks: how does the way something is effect societal thinking? Congruently it asks the question: how do we change things? The critical perspective is essential for successfully understanding anything in today’s society. It does not have strict guidelines for how to analyze, it just asks these questions to understand. It looks at how societies create meaning through ideology. It focuses on power differences and how hegemony, which is reinforced ideologies put forth by a dominant group, effects society. It questions the hegemony that describes who ought to be and who ought not to be empowered. (Sellnow, 2010 71) By using this perspective, we can understand the messages of “othering” our culture is sending us.

Although the Marxist perspective, originally introduced by the German philosopher Karl Marx, largely focuses on economic structures, it can be used to critically analyze any cultural structure, norm, practice, or ideology. (Sellnow, 2010 72) A Critical Marxist approach will analyze a cultural texts and look for common sense ideology that is blatantly accepted even if it is discriminatory towards a certain group. (Sellnow, 2010, 72). This essay will use this same approach to analyze the ideology that is being reinforced by popular anime.

Artifact

The artifact that will analyzed in this essay to better understand the messages of “othering” that anime reinforce, is the hit anime show and manga, One Piece. One piece has sold more copies of its manga, a Japanese comic book, than any other manga. With over 400 million

copies sold since its release in 1997 it is incredibly popular within this audience. (One Piece) Congruently it is also one of the most watched anime series as it was made into a TV show in 1999 with currently 690 episodes released. This manga was written by Eiichiro Oda and follows the story of a pirate named Monkey D. Luffy and his pirate crew, the Straw Hat Pirates. Because this manga and anime series is so well known to its audience, it is a perfect anime to analyze.

As aforementioned this anime follows the story of the Straw Hat Pirates, named after the straw hat that Monkey D. Luffy wears throughout this series. This essay will not be analyzing the entire show but in particular one of the episode arcs that takes place between episodes 520-568. This particular arc deals with the straw hats adventures on the famous Fishman Island. What makes this arc so important to this criticism are the episodes messages of “othering” that it sends to its audience.

Character analysis

To understand this through a Neo-Marxist critical perspective we have to look at the clashing ideologies that take place in this arc. The context for these episodes is an island, at the bottom of the ocean, which all pirates that are trying to reach the grand line have to stop at before carrying on with their adventures. Because of the influx of human pirates to this island of fishmen and mermaids there has been an increase in conflict. What has happened is the humans have established themselves as superior to the fishmen and mermaids and have started to treat them poorly. This has caused great resentment over time. By the time in the history that the Straw Hat pirates arrive a coup de’ ta of the government is underway. Hody, a fishman who has lived in the slums of Fishman Island has been influenced by a previous generation of fishmen who fought vehemently against the evil humans, has raised up his own army to overthrow the existing government that is complicit to will of the humans.

From here the show reveals two ideologies that are in tension with one another. One ideology, held by the queen of Fishman Island, wants to increase relations between fishmen and humans by moving the island to the ocean surface so that fishmen and mermaids have the opportunity to understand humans better. The other ideology, which is held by Hody and his previous mentors, wants to get revenge for all the suffering that humans have caused. One group is trying to understand the “other” while the second party is trying to take revenge on the “other,” only perpetuating the hatred. It is at this point that Luffy and his Straw Hat Pirates break this system of hatred.

Analysis of Ideology

Throughout the entire show Monkey D. Luffy does not seem to abide by the rules of classification. What makes Luffy interesting and a powerful pirate, as something pointed out by many characters in the show, is his ability to befriend anybody he comes into contact with, including those who are “other” than him. Some of his crew members include: a pirate hunter, a navigator that was part of a different pirate crew, a monster that was an outcast to society, a chronic liar who wishes he was the captain of the crew, a shipwright who was an enemy in a different arc, a woman who was a target of the world who manipulated the Straw Hat Crew to evade the Government, a musician that is dead and nothing but bones yet still alive, and lastly a

cook who is nothing more than a womanizer. This very diverse crew, which includes some characters that at one point were Luffy's enemies, are all part of one unifying identity, the Straw Hat Pirates. From this alone it can already see that this anime really is trying to break the ideology that the "other" is evil. The entire crew would be the "other" to Luffy and yet he still befriends them all and adds them to his crew.

One of the reasons that makes Luffy such an interesting character is that he never judges a book by its cover. Luffy is not known for being the brightest pirate but he definitely has great wisdom in regards to understanding the "other." This is clearly evident in his dealings on Fishman Island.

Now that there is an established understanding for these episodes I will use the Neo-Marxist perspective to analyze the values portrayed in this show. Already it is evident that Luffy's ideology is one of non-prejudice. He is a character that holds no prejudices about anyone and in fact fights against the hold prejudices in the show by befriendng societal outcasts and adding them to his crew. However, a greater understanding can be gained by analyzing this arc.

As this essay has already mentioned, there are two clashing ideologies that exist in this series. The hegemony that is held throughout the arc is that the "other" is evil and should be subordinate to "us." The revolting fishmen believe that the humans, which have caused them great suffering, should come to fear the fishmen and anyone, even fishmen themselves, who sides with the humans will be eliminated. The humans, congruently have always seemed to believe that the fishmen are of lesser value and were the instigators of this strife cycle. This is the harm that "othering" and classification causes.

This problem of "othering" that exists in this fictional world is a similar type of "othering" and prejudice that has plagued the United States for all of its history. This prejudiced, "other" ideology is not a new creation and has been the cause of much of the strife and violence that has existed in the U.S. From a critical perspective it must be asked, why does this message even exist? Who benefits from a message like this? The reality is those who are in the dominant majority group create this message because they can prosper from discriminating message. The hegemonic ideology that whites are superior to blacks and men are superior to women are two ideologies that have woven themselves into the fabric of our cultural thinking. The reason that they still exist is because they are benefiting someone. For the U.S. it is white males that create this ideology and have benefited from this prejudiced "othering." In regards to One Piece, humans have benefited from the hegemony that humans are superior to fishmen.

One Piece attacks the heart of this "othering" problem. This arc of episodes critiques reality quite well. The history to this island is one of hatred and strife common to that experienced in reality. There are always those trying to bring the conflicting groups and ideologies together; in One Piece, the queen and another political figure, Boss Jinbei, tried to bring about reconciliation between fishmen and humans. However, there was a group, led by Hody, who fought to resist this reconciliation because of the message that was reinforced by the previous generation as well as the violence they witnessed. Luffy, even though he wanted to bring about peace by beating Hody and his crew, could only bring more strife by perpetuating

the struggle between fishmen and humans. The great rift that has grown between humans and fishmen is evident when Jinbei says,

“Whenever fishmen have tried to open their hearts to humans, the humans have only worked against them. Humans are brutal creatures. Humans discriminate against fishmen and hate them. The harsh reality of the situation is that history has taught fishmen to see things in a negative light.” (One Piece, episode 549)

The truth to this statement is that much of the ideology is passed down generationally. The ideology that was passed to Hody which caused him to fight was that humans were despicable creatures that deserve all the evil that can be brought against them. This ideology inspired Hody to fight against humans and even fishmen to dominate all of humanity. This ideology of, superiority over, and subjugation of the “other,” inspired revenge and perpetuated more violence.

It does seem at this point that One Piece only reinforces the already held notion and practice of “othering,” not dismantle it. The dismantling process comes when Luffy and his Pirates enter the picture. This group of humans, which fishmen thought would wreak havoc on the island, fought to save the fishmen and in the process establish good relations between humans and fishmen. Luffy, with the help of his crew and Jinbei, defeated Hody and his subordinates saving Fishman Island from tyranny and destruction. What is important to recognize is that Luffy, alongside of Fishmen, was able to defeat Hody. Not only did he defeat Hody but he also defeated the ideology that had been so prevalent in the fishman culture. Luffy, a human worked on the side of the fishmen to defeat those who were oppressing them. He single handedly broke the system of hatred that had existed between humans and fishmen.

One Piece, as we have seen has many implications that should affect how the audience understands this “othering” system. The most important message the audience receives from this show is that nothing that is has to be that way. The ideology that had caused all of the injustices on Fishman Island did not have to exist. This is something that this anime tries to make evident. If you want a change you have to change it. The queen recognized the evil and tried to change the system. Hody, even though he only worsened the situation, also tried to change the system he lived in. Luffy and Jinbei were trying to change the system. It only took a few people trying change this system of revenge and hatred to actually change it. This message that One Piece is sending to the audience, empowers the audience to be the change that they want.

This show also gives an example of how to do it well. Jinbei recognized that if Luffy fought Hody alone, the Fishmen would only see this as another injustice caused by humans even if Hody was obviously quite evil. This is why it was necessary for both Luffy and Jinbei to team up to fight the injustice. The message here is that if people from opposing sides work together a greater change can be achieved. Lastly, and arguably the most important message this anime sends to its audience is, knowing the “other” is the best way to fight prejudice. This was what the queen, before she was assassinated by Hody, was striving for. She wanted to petition to move the island to the surface in order for fishmen and humans to come to understand one another. By creating understanding of the “other,” prejudices are removed and right relationships can ensue.

These messages empower the audience to act in a way that disrupts the prejudice caused by “othering.” In a world wrought with damaging prejudices it is necessary for people to take action and remove the hatred that exists because of “othering.’

By using critical perspective approach this essay analyzed at the messages of “othering” that are reinforced in our society. “Othering” was defined as “the action or attitude of perceiving or treating the other as different.” (Culea, 95) In particular, this essay analyzed the messages of “othering” that popular anime sends to its audience and how it empowers the audience to fight against negative stereotypes that enable discrimination.

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