Japan Past & Present

A Silent Voice: Deafness, Japanese Sign Language, and Pop Culture

Lesson Plan: *A Silent Voice*: Deafness, Japanese Sign Language, and Pop Culture
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Target Audience:

Undergraduate students

Duration:

1 or 2 class sessions (add one more if the film is screened in class)

Learning Objectives:

The 2016 animated film *A Silent Voice* was quite successful in Japan and received much global attention, particularly for its portrayal of a Deaf main character, as well as issues related to bullying and mental health. It is also one of the first animated Japanese works to incorporate accurate Japanese Sign Language, serving as the first exposure to JSL to many outside of Japan. It is also a fraught work, having been both praised and

criticized for its depictions of Deafness by Deaf people in Japan, as well as its problematic gender dynamics. This makes it an excellent case study to prompt conversations about Deafness and disability in relation to the continued extraordinary global influence of Japanese pop culture (especially anime, manga, and games), as well as the politics of Japanese Sign Language itself and its depictions in media.

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:

- Japanese pop culture, anime, film, or media courses
- Japanese literature courses (especially if also looking at the manga version)
- Modern Japanese history courses
- ASL and/or Deaf culture-related courses

Required Materials:

- *A Silent Voice* (Koe no katachi), a 2016 animated film directed by Yamada Naoko. Released on Blu Ray/DVD; also digitally rentable on Amazon, Google Play, YouTube, etc.

  Content warning: depictions of bullying and contemplations of suicide.

Potential Readings/Viewings:

A 6-part YouTube series by DeafJapan TV.

- A wonderful explanation of all the instances of JSL in *A Silent Voice*; explanations are in ASL with English subtitles.

The *Silent Voice* manga, volume 1.

- Useful if you want to consider questions of adaptation/differences between the experience of the film and the original comic.

Yuta Kaminishi, "Inclusive Media Mix: Shaping Communication through A

Silent Voice," *The Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* 4 (2023): 1-30.

- An exploration of the cross-media nature of *A Silent Voice*—this is the usual content strategy for Japanese pop cultural franchises, but *A Silent Voice* is distinct in its collaboration "with actors across the public sector such as schools, local governments, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), to enhance inclusive education in Japan."

Yoshiko Okuyama, "Portraying Deaf Characters," in *Reframing Disability in Manga* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

- An important exploration of Deaf characters in manga, both *A Silent Voice* and otherwise; delves into the particularities of rendering Deafness and JSL in this medium.

Karen Nakamura, "The Politics of Japanese Sign Language," in *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity* (Cornell University Press: 2006).

- Still the most significant English-language academic work on Deaf communities in Japan and Japanese Sign Language; this chapter provides excellent context for the stakes of sign language and should be read by the instructor even if not assigned for the students. (The rest of the book also offers extremely valuable history of Japan's Deaf communities.)

Arran Stibbe, "Disability, Gender, and Power in Japanese Television Drama," *Japan Forum*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2004), pp. 21–36.

- An excellent article about the portrayal of Deafness and coded femininity in Japanese TV dramas from the 2000s and earlier.

Background Information for Instructors:

This film exists in relation to the fraught and complex history of the Deaf

community in Japan, many of whom have been historically prohibited from learning sign language in schools; Karen Nakamura's book, mentioned in the potential readings above, provides an excellent introduction to this history up until around the year 2000.

Discussion Questions:

1. This film is far from a straightforward example of a romance between a Deaf and hearing character, which is what many expected going into it—rather, it is a depiction of a Deaf character, Shōko, being bullied; her bully, Shōya, growing up and grappling with his past actions (as well as mental health issues); and the complex relationship between them that emerges. What are your thoughts on the relationship between the two main characters, and the depiction of bullying in the film?
2. Is *A Silent Voice* about Deafness? In other words, is Deafness just a small aspect of the film, to add interest and uniqueness, is it a major theme, or somewhere in between? (A parallel question—how would the film have differed if both main characters were Deaf, or both were hearing?)
3. What are some things you noticed about the animated representation of Japanese Sign Language in the film? How about the manga? What do you think are the most important aspects of portraying sign language on the screen and the page?
4. Shōya, in the latter half of the film, is depicted as grappling with mental health issues such as depression and social anxiety. How are these depicted visually and narratively in the film, and how do these depictions compare to the representations of Deafness?
5. Much contemporary discourse about disability and Deafness in media relates to the question of representation—for example, what characters constitutes "good" and "bad" representation of Deaf and disabled people; what are the limits of this kind of representation; and the ethics of representing a group that is not one's own. How does *A Silent Voice* deal with questions of representing Deaf and disabled people and their

perspectives on screen?

6. The film has often been discussed in terms of its highly gendered dynamics. How might the film have differed if Shōko were a boy and Shōya a girl?

Relevant Vocabulary:

Here is a great general guide for best practices in disability-related language by the Center for Disability Rights.

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