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Watching "I Am A Comedian" (Dir. Fumiari Hyuga, 2022) in a U.S. Classroom

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Abstract: *"I Am A Comedian"(Dir. Fumiari Hyuga, 2022) is a documentary featuring a prominent Japanese comedian, Daisuke Muramoto, who "disappeared" from TV programs despite his popularity and talent, due to the shift of his comedy routine to political satire. The author watched the film with students in a Japanese pop culture class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and also invited Muramoto himself to the class. This essay reviews the documentary within its social context and reports on the engaging class discussion with Muramoto. Creative expression provides people, especially those who are impacted and marginalized, means to contest power. At the same time, we are in an era when political and social conflicts have become exceedingly intense, making it imperative that the manifestation of ideas and opinions be both compelling and sensitive to others. Muramoto's journey in pursuing his comedy provides us with insights to reflect on what true freedom of speech is and the power and responsibility that accompany artistic expression.*

Keywords*: Daisuke Muramoto, Freedom of expression, Political satire, Comedy, Contemporary Japan*

One of the courses I teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago is "Globalizing Japanese Pop Culture." (Kojima Hibino 2021) As "interest in anime, manga, J-Pop, and fashion" (92.1%) is the dominant motivation for learning Japanese language in North America (Japan Foundation 2023: 44), most of the students taking the course are anime and manga fans. Some students who come without reading the course description are disappointed to find that the course is not about analyzing or critiquing anime, but rather about contemporary Japanese sociology through the lens of pop culture phenomena. However, it's precisely those students who admire "cool Japan" that I want to challenge to step out and critically examine the reality of Japanese society. And through that, I hope they engage more deeply with Japanese society on a human level.

At the end of 2017, when I was designing this course, an "incident" occurred on Japanese television. The comedy duo Woman Rush Hour appeared on a prestigious prime-time comedy show, The

Manzai, and joked about one controversial issue after another that even news programs hesitated to address head-on, such as nuclear power plants, disaster relief, and the U.S. military base in Okinawa. It was bold political and societal satire. Like a brisk wind blowing through a closed room, it injected overwhelmingly fresh oxygen, making many viewers realize for the first time how stagnant the atmosphere had become. And it didn't stop there. Just as everyone thought the final punchline had hit home—the general public's apathy, the camera zoomed in and Daisuke Muramoto, a member of the duo and the writer of their routines, pointed straight at it and declared, "It's about you guys!" It was a pointed critique of the viewers themselves. The discomfort of the truth finally confronted the self that had been laughing in exhilaration. It was phenomenal. (De Haven 2017; Litera 2017; Osaki 2018)

During the second Abe administration (2012–2020), freedom of speech in Japan visibly eroded. Press Freedom Index Rankings continued to slip, reaching a historic low of 72nd place in 2017 (Reporters without Borders). After the Moritomo-Kake scandals came to light, suggesting Abe government favoritism and a subsequent cover-up (Soble 2017; The Japan Times 2017), the word *sontaku* (the word refers to subordinates' anticipatory compliance with superiors' expectations) won the top buzzword award of the year weeks before The Manzai episode with Woman Rush Hour aired (Kyodo News 2017; Carlson 2020). While there was no evidence that the Abe administration formally restricted the freedom of speech in media, after Koichi Hagiuda, then-Executive Acting Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party, sent a memo to broadcasting stations to "ask" for an assurance of "fairness, neutrality, and objectivity in reporting during the election period" in November 2014, less and less criticism or even questioning against the government was seen in the media (Mochizuki 2017). In March 2017, at the 193rd National Diet House of Representatives, a member of the House, Seiji Osaka, raised concerns about increased pressure on the media by the Abe administration, including Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Sanae Takaichi's remark on the government's right to shut down "politically biased" broadcasters (Osaka 2017). To that, Prime Minister Abe responded, "The assertion of 'increased pressure on the media by the Abe administration' is completely unfounded …The government believes that freedom of speech and expression, which are fundamental human rights guaranteed by the Constitution, should naturally be respected" (Abe 2017). However, as expressed in the 2016 Human Rights Report by the U.S. Department of State, while there was no "overt restriction," "self-censorship practices within major media outlets" had become common because of indirect encouragement by the government. Amidst this backdrop, the duo, or rather, Daisuke Muramoto's determination and resolve to perform bold political satire were evident. Fuji TV also amazed me with its decision to broadcast it,[1] although the film "*I Am A Comedian*" documented the moments of slight self-censorship or *sontaku* within the decision for the next year's The Manzai 2018 episode (Hyuga 2022). There are Japanese comedians who do political satire,[2] but it was unprecedented for a young comedian with such high skill and idol-like popularity to deliver it right in the mainstream and turn it into a masterpiece of laughter.

Although Woman Rush Hour, especially Daisuke Muramoto, received acclaim from people who were concerned about the decline of freedom of speech, he also received intense criticism on social media, including Twitter, Yahoo News Japan, and YouTube, for the routine being mostly "too political," "inappropriate for comedy," or "biased."[3] While there is a

1 Muramoto's tweet suggests that even he was surprised that his act was aired without cutting jokes on nuclear power plants, disaster relief, and Okinawa base (Muramoto 2017).

2 The skit group, The Newspaper, is one of the successful satirical comedians, however, they are rarely on TV. Refer (De Haven 2020) for the interviews with members of The Newspaper and Muramoto.

3 Examples of those comments are cited in (De Haven 2017) and (Huffpost 2017). Oricon News conducted an online survey on people's opinions about Woman Rush Hour's political satire, in which 38.2% approved, and 12.9% disapproved. Seemingly, those who approved it exceeded those who didn't. However, many approval responses were accompanied by conditional comments, such as "やること自体は良いが、芸人としての思想が強く働いているのが問題 [While political satire itself is ok, the problem is that the comedian's personal beliefs are too strong.]" "本人の不勉強や、他者の虚偽捏造を真に受けてスピーカーになった場合はしっかり罰するべき [If the comedian becomes a spokesperson due to their own lack of knowledge or

general expectation of comedy in Japan to be simply silly and goofy,[4] the negative reactions that Muramoto received were punitive and retaliatory rather than offering comments. His routines came to be prechecked and edited out before broadcasting. Subsequently, his television appearances dwindled, first by the broadcasters' and then by Muramoto's own decision as he lost interest in the TV industry, which, just like a "theme park," only presents a beautified performance that lacks true realism and complexity (Muramoto 2020: 272, 283). This incident inspired me to add a session on "comedy and satire, politicality and apoliticality, democracy and freedom of speech" to the syllabus of Globalizing Japanese Pop Culture.

In the U.S., political satire is in the mainstream of comedy; therefore, students are stunned by the vast difference in circumstances when they read about Muramoto. After all, it is a society in which comedians are invited to the White House to perform stand-up in front of the president, where nothing is off limits as joke fodder—be it the President himself, the Republican and Democratic leadership, or contentious policies. (On a side note, Trump is the only president who has refused to participate in the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner.) Some students even express the sense that satire has become too commonplace, leading to it becoming stale. Indeed, not all satire is good, and there are distinctions between genuinely funny stand-up and not. While comedy based on personal experiences or insights feels easier to laugh at, these jokes are not always guaranteed to land, even if they are based on a comedian's own identity. Muramoto uses his own experiences, for example, hailing from a rural town with a nuclear power plant, but he also uses the experiences of others, such as Okinawans, Ainu, Zainichi Koreans, and people with disabilities, and turns these stories into successful comedic moments. Not all can achieve such heights. What sets him apart?

Watching the documentary "*I Am A Comedian*" (directed by Fumiari Hyuga), which followed Daisuke Muramoto's three years since The Manzai, it becomes clear that Daisuke Muramoto is a natural ethnographer. Ethnography is a research method often used in anthropology and sociology to gain knowledge about people's behaviors and ideas by participating in the community and listening to their stories. While theoretical and methodological knowledge for ethnography has been developed, it is, in fact, that the researcher's aptitude plays a significant role in its success. Cameras follow Muramoto as he travels across the country. Behind the few minutes of edited scenes, we can glimpse the rich experiences he shares with the locals.

"We often use the word 'information,' such as receiving 'information' from the news or asking for 'information' about the disaster in Kumamoto. We obtain 'information' from TV, newspapers, and online news. What I realized on the ground was that the reality behind the word 'information' was 'pain.' It was someone's pain." (Muramoto 2020: 48)

The documentary reveals that people whose voices have been continuously ignored seek to be heard by Muramoto. What enables the space to be filled with trust and openness is his exceptional empathy and genuine curiosity—perhaps stemming from his own experiences and pains. Yet, Muramoto doesn't drown in sympathy nor does he leap into shallow political correctness. He maintains a detached perspective, calmly observing with his own sensibility. This is arguably because he has an unwavering purpose to express everything as comedy.

spreads falsehoods, they should be strictly punished.] " The majority response was "undecided/not sure" (48.9%), with comments such as "漫才やバラエティ番組は、そういった社会問題を考えないで観たい [I want to watch manzai and variety show programs without thinking about those social issues.] " "上手く笑いに変えられず、ただ政治批判するネタならやめた方がいい [If they can't successfully turn it into humor and it just ends up being political criticism, it's better to stop.]" (Oricon 2018)

4 For example, Chad Mullane, an Australian comedian affiliated with the same agency as Muramoto, Yoshimoto Kogyo, claims that Japanese comedy is fundamentally incompatible with complex discussions or satire, indicating its origin as a "blessing act [祝福芸]," in contrast to Western comedy, which originated from the court's jester (Mullane 2018: 41). Hisashi Inoue, a prominent playwright, and writer of comedic and satirical fiction, on the other hand, claims that, while humor was generally considered inappropriate among the upper class and formal situations, satirical tradition did exist in the 18th and 19th centuries among common people as a means of releasing pressure. Inoue, however, also emphasizes that if the satire went too far, "you could lose your head for it," which did not leave much room for political satire in Japanese comedy (Asia Society n.d.).

"*I Am A Comedian*" portrays Daisuke Muramoto's professionalism and pride as a comedian—from the relentless practice sessions with his partner, Nakagawa Paradise, to studying English alone in a park in New York. His obsessive passion for comedy, which at times seems to border on madness, is on display throughout the documentary. "I believe comedy is the best, the greatest job in the world," Muramoto retorts during an argument with his father about the means to change politics and society. It might have been a tit-for-tat in a heated argument over drinks. However, it's his undeniable conviction. When encountering expressions crafted from such sincerity, we as an audience will experience something beyond just laughter.

In April of this year, "Globalizing Japanese Pop Culture" was fortunate enough to watch the documentary and have a discussion with Daisuke Muramoto himself. The session was filled with laughter thanks to Muramoto's humor, but the discussion was not just amusing for the students; rather, it was "a truly thought-provoking conversation."[5] We have many international students and some of them come from societies where freedom of speech is more restricted than in Japan. One international student said that those who criticized the authority "will be missing." Another international student remarked, "We can't speak freely, but if we stay silent, nothing changes, so we really should speak up." Listening to such classmates, American students were shocked by the inability to freely discuss politics ("genuinely sucks!"), realizing how "privileged" their situation of satire being commonplace is.

However, Muramoto further questioned students about how comedy and art can continue to be free in the current situation where everyone surveils and punishes each other, due to the proliferation of social media. For instance, what do they think of Dave Chappelle, who is criticized for attacking and promoting discrimination against transwomen? Should minorities not be the subject of jokes? How do they feel about Chris Rock's frequent usage of the N-word in his jokes? These questions seemed to prompt the young artists, who often fall into binary thinking of right/wrong or acceptable/unacceptable, to contemplate things they "hadn't exactly thought of before." The factors that play into the understanding of jokes—such as the involvement of the joker and the joke's subject, the relationship between comedian and audience, and the context of the joke—apply not only to comedy but to all forms of expression. One student realized this, commenting that, "We tackled the same issues in art-making." Another student's opinion that both art and comedy are "something that should create discussions" resonates with the stand-up comedy pursued by Daisuke Muramoto as depicted in the film.

Both the film and our class discussion revolved around the fundamental question: What is truly free expression, and how can we pursue it? The essential aspect is the sensitivity to the underlying structure in which any communication takes place, particularly awareness of the default power imbalance in a society. Comedy and art can shake this default and reclaim space from those who dominate it, by either directly spotlighting the neglected voices, as Muramoto introduced the comedy concept of "punching up" (as opposed to "punching down") in class, or, as expressed by Dara Jemmott, a New York-based stand-up comedian featured in the film, by planting seeds of thought in people's minds. Here, I would

5 Quotes in this and the next paragraphs come from students, either during the discussion or in their after-class reflections.

like to note the specificity of creative expressions. Unlike other modes of communication, such as legal or political, which rest on facticity and pragmatism, comedy and art intend to address the unjust structure by pushing the edge and expanding boundaries via inspiration and imagination. In that process, therefore, expressions may potentially take a form that may be generally considered "inappropriate," "uncomfortable," or "controversial." Muramoto is also cautious about the potential moments in which people avoid such expressions altogether and turn them into a new taboo, because the goal of his creative expression is to empower people who are structurally oppressed instead of enclosing them in a handle-with-care box. In the end, he sees the inherent power of people no matter how they are considered powerless and believes in comedy as a means to emancipate that power. In the narrow gap between "harmless humor" and "cancel culture," there might be a way to embrace someone's pain and transform it into energy to live.

"*I Am A Comedian*" was released nationwide in Japan in July 2024. While there is currently no plan for global public release, a screening and panel discussion with the director Fumiari Hyuga and the comedian Daisuke Muramoto will be held in Chicago in Spring 2025.[6]

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6 Previous versions of this commentary were published in Japanese in マガジン9 [*Magazine 9*] on June 12th, 2024 as "アメリカの学生と『アイアム・ア・コメディアン』(日向史有監督/2022年)を観る" (https://maga9.jp/240612-2/), and in English on the author's blog, artfoodandpolitics, on May 21st, 2024 as 'Watching "*I Am A Comedian*" (Dir. Fumiari Hyuga, 2022) with Students in the U.S.' (https://artfoodandpolitics.blogspot.com).

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