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<Sample Essay>

Race as a Cinematic Experience in Anime

In her book *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies*, American author bell hooks describes movies and films as a “border crossing,” a way to “provide discourses of race, sex, and class” with conflicts and characters that give a “reimagined, reinvented version of the real” (hooks 1-2). Anime, since its rise in popularity during postwar Japan, has adapted a style of episode formatting and thematic expression that has lent anime itself to appear more cinematic than most other television shows. A method of the development of these themes, specifically, will be discussed in detail. In this essay, I will discuss aspects of race in characters and in their roles in episodes of *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*, and *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* that are used as ways to enrich their narratives and to establish themes in these anime that create a cinematic experience that bell hooks argues is in every film.

This cinematic experience is created in part by the familiarity of the work to real life. According to hooks, movies “look like something familiar, but in actuality [they are] a different universe from the world of real. That’s what makes movies so compelling” (hooks 1). Just as

movies take what their audiences know and put unique spins on those topics, anime portrays race to familiarize its watchers but also interests them by altering certain aspects of race.

Such an alteration is noticeable in *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*, an anime epic concerning the other-worldly endeavors that the Elric Brothers, Edward and Alphonse, face in order to gain redemption and recover their bodies. The brothers lost them in a failed attempt to revive their late mother with alchemy. Familiarizing aspects of this anime lie in the racially indicating appearances of the characters. The Elric Brothers, their childhood friend, Winry Rockbell, and the rest of the natives who live in that country have white skin and countenances that resemble those of Europeans or Caucasian Americans. But these people are not called so. They are Amestrians from the country of Amestris. Amestris is notable for its strong military and renowned state alchemists, who use the power of the earth to bend and shape it by will into virtually anything as long as mass is constant throughout the transmutation (*Fullmetal Alchemist...*). This aspect of the Amestrian race attests to hooks's description of a compelling cinematic experience: Amestrians resemble the recognizable Westerner; but their national practices, alchemy and military, are enough to keep an audience in wonder of this familiar looking but noticeably different race of people.

In her book *Anime: from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, Susan J. Napier offers some insight into reasons for these animators not to make these characters look Japanese, considering that anime is made in Japan. Saying that anime characters look "Western" is less accurate than saying the characters are drawn in an "anime style" (Napier 25), according to Napier. She quotes the Japanese animator Oshii Mamoru and says that this "anime style" is "an effort by modern Japanese to 'evade the fact that they are Japanese'" (Napier 25). This evasion is done in order to make anime more relatable to foreign audiences, especially Westerners. The actual race of

characters such as Ed and Winry is slightly distinguishable, but mostly ambiguous, leaving the audience to fill in the gaps. Conversely, the race of the characters in *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* are established and less ambiguous in the initial setting of the anime.

The event that acts as the starting point of the conflicts revealed in *Code Geass* is the declaration of war against and subsequent domination of Japan by the Holy Britannian Empire. The anime's first episode, "The Day a New Demon was Born," focuses on the effects of this event on the protagonist, Lelouch Lamperouge, and his Japanese best friend Suzaku Kururugi. Suzaku is sad for his country, now renamed Area 11, but becomes an Honorary Britannian, a Japanese citizen who has renounced ties with Japan and pledged to live the Britannian lifestyle, in the military. And Lelouch, from the point of the war on, despite he himself being a Britannian, vows to destroy Britannia (*Code Geass...*). Right in the first episode, themes of imperialism and nationalism appear to familiarize viewers with types of conflicts represented in the anime, but these themes take their own style in terms of the anime with the concept of Britannia, which most likely represents the similar superpower of America.

Another aspect of the race of the characters that adds subtle depth to the narrative is the actual appearance of the characters. Lelouch, a born Britannian, has dark hair and eyes, traits more relatable to those of Japanese descent. And Suzaku looks more Britannian, or Western, despite him being Japanese. This fact may be the anime's way of revealing the true ties of these characters. Lelouch, Japanese by appearance, sides against Britannia and becomes the leader of a Japanese resistance group. And Suzaku becomes a ranked soldier for the Britannian army (*Code Geass...*). The irony of this scenario teaches a lesson to the viewers: that a person's race is secondary to what that person stands for. Though never stated in the anime, this lesson is

instilled in a way to the watchers, as they find themselves supporting the protagonist and his endeavors, despite him being a terrorist in the eyes of the majority.

Another tactic *Code Geass* uses to add depth to its narrative is the juxtaposition of the oppression of the Japanese and tyranny of the Britannian military with the lifestyle of the native Britannians and how unaware they are of the problems their military is causing for innocent races of people. In “The Day a New Demon was Born,” Lelouch and his friend Rivalz witness a truck crash on the highway on their way to school. Upon sight of the drivers’ distress and some mysterious other thing, Lelouch runs over to examine the situation, while Rivalz is reluctant to join and would rather go to school, as he mentions several times in this scene. While Rivalz’s reaction is typical of an unassuming Britannian high school student, the context of the situation is what adds depth to how the watchers form their opinions of the Britannian versus the Japanese lifestyle. The watchers can suspect the truck drivers to be the ones who stole “that thing” from the Britannian military. (“The Day a New Demon...”). And later in the episode, the drivers are revealed as Japanese radicals against the domination of their country. These radicals appear to be the ones causing trouble for Britannia and themselves, but the watchers nonetheless are interested in the endeavors of the radicals, and even wish for them to succeed. The watchers could not care less about Rivalz and his school affairs. But why is this so? This commonly implemented technique in forms of fiction is the call to action, in which the protagonist encounters the catalyst to his adventure, be it a person or event. *Code Geass* uses the racial conflicts within this ghetto of Area 11 to set Lelouch off on his journey, and watchers want to see it to its end.

Similarly, in the first episode, when the prince of the Holy Britannian Empire orders the destruction of the Shinjuku ghetto and everyone in it, the anime uses the goals of the characters,

especially the minorities, to develop perspectives on which race is actually the true threat to the other in this chaotic scenario. During the slaughter, a Britannian soldier describes the Japanese, or the enemy, as “garbage [that] can never hope to become even Honorary Britannians! Wipe out every last one of ‘em!” (“The Day a New Demon...”). The watchers know that the radical actions of the Japanese are only efforts to regain freedom for their country, a situation most people can empathize with. So the watchers hear the words of this soldier with contempt for his ignorance towards the struggle of the Japanese. But the intuitive watchers will understand that utilizing instances like this purging and many other scenes in the anime are its way of establishing the conflict between races in its narrative. The soldier says what he says because his race and background has led him to become ignorant. Watchers who understand that fact will come to appreciate the depth existent in the racial conflicts in *Code Geass* that make it feel like a movie.

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood adds depth to its characters in a similar way in terms of some of the minority races in the anime. Scar, an originally nameless warrior monk who hails from the desert-barren land of Ishval, in which Ishvalans are a race of people with noticeably dark skin and red eyes, seeks revenge on state alchemists for their contributions to the slaughter of his race of people in the Ishvalan Conflict (*Fullmetal Alchemist...*). In subsequent episodes to his reveal, Scar is seen brutally killing several State Alchemists. But his actual motive for doing so is clarified in episode nine of season two, “Bucks in the Distance,” in which Scar recounts his past as Winry Rockbell holds him at gunpoint and aims to shoot him for killing her parents during the Ishvalan Conflict, an experience that Scar recalls as a result of realizing this familial connection. At this point, especially when Scar recalls seeing his village in ruin, the watchers get a sense of the hatred and anguish he has endured as an Ishvalan. Despite his murderous nature

and inherent villain status, the watchers can still empathize with him as a struggling minority trying to find closure.

Later in *Brotherhood*, episode thirteen of season three, “Conflict at Baschool,” Scar encounters a character of his race in the military, Major Miles of Amestris’s northern military section. Miles is an Amestrian with a strong Ishvalan bloodline. As a result, he looks nothing like an Amestrian, and everything like an Ishvalan. (*Fullemtal Alchemist...*). When Scar and Miles meet, Miles tells of his aims to change the negative outlook Amestrians have on Ishvalans from the inside by working in the military: “I’m an Ishvalan pebble tossed into the ocean of the Amestrian military. Maybe in time, the ripples I create will become great waves” (“Conflict at Baschool”). Miles as a character reveals themes of progressivism into the anime, and when he and Scar are juxtaposed this way in the episode, Miles appears more like a progressive minority in society today, while Scar, “a festering wound of hatred born of the Great Ishvalan War,” is stuck in the past, unable to change his ways and doomed to drown in his hatred (“Conflict at Baschool”).

These two anime have only begun to develop their narratives in terms of race. After all, only a few episodes were analyzed; only parts of the cinematic experience that these anime carry have been discussed. And so many themes and complexities of narrative have been discovered that these anime could also double as books, which most do, actually. Japanese graphic novels, (manga), or even light novels are often recreated into anime when they become popular in the community. *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* is one of those recreations. What does this fact implicate towards the significance of the cinematic experience in anime? How can some anime exist in books and on the television screen, and all the while contain themes and narratives similar to those of movies? One answer is certain: anime as a media form is truly unique.

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