

Japan: Fatal Attraction Toward Sensationalism and Morbidity

An Essay on the Exploitation of Scandals,
Violence and Tragedies by the Japanese Media.

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The stability and safety of Japanese society can certainly be a point of envy to other developed countries throughout the world. Respect for traditions and family values is high and crime rate is low. Furthermore, Japan has the longest life expectancy in the world, which, added to the above mentioned characteristics of its society, provides a rather ideal way of life for its citizens. Seen from the outside, Japan appears to be a paradise protected from the devastating effects of uncontrolled economic growth and immoral modernity. However, because or in spite of all these qualities, sensationalism and morbidity hold an incredible fascination for the Japanese people, who devour the numerous tabloids printed every week and gather regularly in front of their television sets to watch programs offering them sensations they perhaps do not get in their quiet and monotonous everyday life.

French society being quite different from Japanese society, its television differs of course accordingly. This article, though comparing some aspects of both countries' television programs, is centered around Japan and will deal only with the exploitation of sensationalism and morbidity made by television, leaving aside the enormous amount of material provided by the tabloids.

SENSATIONALISM

Sensationalism and Japan

Every day, 5 days a week, 12 months a year, Japanese television broadcasts programs based on sensationalism, exploiting sex, scandals, violence, crimes, accidents and any other sort of voyeurism with a delighted good conscience and an evident touch of sadism. Those programs, known as the *Wide Shows*, are extremely popular among the Japanese public who do not seem particularly upset by their, to say the least, bad taste.

Twice daily except on week-ends, four out of the main seven channels on Japanese television offer, both in the mornings and in the afternoons, approximately four hours of sensational news, very often of the lowest possible kind. These *Wide Shows* are aired on the following channels and at the following hours (The programs

aired in the early morning before the *Wide Shows* will not be treated):

1) ASAHI TELEVISION NETWORK:

- *Morning*,¹⁾ from 8:00 a. m. to 9:55 a. m.
- *Wide show: Scramble*,²⁾ from 12:00 a. m. to 2:00 p. m.

*This program started in April 1996.

2) TBS (Tokyo Broadcasting System):

- *Morning Eye*,³⁾ from 8:30 a. m. to 9:55 a. m.

* Up to the end of May 1996: *Super Wide*,⁴⁾ from 2:00 p. m. to 4:00 p. m.

"TBS has decided to terminate its *Super Wide* variety program by the end of (the) month (of may) because of a controversy involving the show and the Aum Shinrikyo cult." printed the Asahi Evening News, on May 9, 1996. The *Super Wide* is the successor to a similar show called "*Let's meet at 3 O'clock*". In October 1989, TBS planned to air an interview with Tsutsumi Sakamoto, a lawyer involved in an anti-Aum campaign, on "*Let's meet at 3 O'clock*". However, after the video of the interview was shown to Aum members, it was not broadcast. Some days later, Sakamoto, his wife and infant son were murdered. Prosecutors have said the family was killed by Aum. "TBS admitted in April that pressure from Aum was the reason for not airing the 1989 interview with lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto." (Asahi Evening News, May 22, 1996) In punishment for its behavior concerning the Sakamoto video tape, TBS took the decision to terminate its *Wide Shows* at the end of May 1996.

3) FUJI TELEVISION:

- *Nice Day*,⁵⁾ from 8:30 a. m. to 9:55 a. m.
- *Big Today*,⁶⁾ from 2:00 p. m. to 4:00 p. m.

4) NIHON BROADCASTING TELEVISION:

- *Look*,⁷⁾ from 8:30 a. m. to 10:30 a. m.
- *The Wide*,⁸⁾ from 1:55 p. m. to 3:50 p. m.

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- 1) 「モーニング」
 - 2) 「ワイド・スクランブル」
 - 3) 「モーニング・EYE」
 - 4) 「スーパーワイド」
 - 5) 「ナイスデイ」
 - 6) 「ビクトゥーデイ」
 - 7) 「ルック」
 - 8) 「ザ・ワイド」

First, ironically enough, one cannot help but observe that none of these shows have a Japanese title but rather an English one, transcribed in the katakana syllabary. Then, considering the time of their airing, it clearly appears they are aimed exclusively at housewives who are supposed to be at home and have the time to watch television while accomplishing their everyday chores.

All the *Wide Shows* have the same characteristics: they are aired live from a studio in Tokyo, with no audience on the set, and are composed of two newscasters, a male and a female, regular reporters to the show and guests, among them famous journalists, lawyers, university professors and personalities of show business. The guests can vary according to the subject treated: for example, when a tunnel collapsed in Hokkaido in February 1996 killing 20 people, professors in engineering were asked to participate and explain the situation, then offer possible solutions to the problem. There can also be journalists reporting live from where the incident is happening.

Each topic treated is presented with big flashy titles and appropriate background music: classical for funerals or tragedies, light tunes for weddings or happy events. The journalist present on the spot, after reporting on the incident he is in charge of, will answer questions asked by Tokyo. Then follows a discussion between the participants of the show, during which they will debate on the pros and cons of each topic and eventually render a verdict.

A very typical way of treating an event is the use of endless repetitions of the same sequence: if no other material is available, the producer of the show will not hesitate to have exactly the same shooting aired again and again. This method of repeating the same thing, visually and orally, allows both to act as filler material and better attract the attention of the public.

As for the length of these shows (four hours a day approximately), one could wonder how Japanese society, which has the reputation of being a stable and secure one, is capable of producing so many dramatic or scandalous events each day. In fact, when looking at the programs carefully, it is clear that the afternoon shows are, with very few exceptions, nothing but the repetition of the morning ones. Sometimes the only notable difference lies in the composition of the staff and of the guests. Moreover, the four channels usually treat the same topics, differing only in the sequence of their presentation.

Three main types of topics can be distinguished: scandals, happy events and tragedies.

Scandals will preferably involve famous people from show business and are often sex-related. Infidelity is one of the favorites on the list of sex-related scandals. Divorce is of course extremely popular among the great moralists of the Japanese media, for whom anything that differs from the norm is to be blamed and chastised.

Actually, the more popular an artist or a famous person is, the more rigid a moral code he or she is expected to conform to. Any deviation from this code of ethics will put the culprit under the enormous pressure of the terrible Japanese media, who allow no rest to the Infamous. This sense of duty and strict moral code is of course approved by the viewers who can condemn the rich and famous, and, in doing so, be the judge of people they both despise and envy. And indeed, there is a kind of moral achievement for a modest spectator to compare one's dull but virtuous life to that of some morally condemnable rich and famous person. A notable exception to this cruel rule of public judgment is made for the imperial family who, as the British royals used to, is supposed to be "a mirror to our betterselves" and being so, absolutely un-attackable by anyone.

Happy events consist mainly in engagements, weddings and births, between and of the rich and famous. Interesting too, is the lavish life style of rich artists whose multi million yen houses, jewels or cars bring dream into the life of the spectators. It gives them a glimpse of what they will never be able to achieve and let them feel rich and famous, albeit temporarily. They can admire the outfits, engagement rings and other paraphernalia of the Happy Ones and dream...

Tragedies range from illness, deaths and terrorism to natural disasters and accidents. This kind of topic is certainly among the favorite ones as it cultivates the sadistic fibre of voyeurism laying in every one of us. It also allows the showing of grieving people: this sadistic and condemnable practice seems to be extremely popular among spectators who can identify with the distressed persons without having to suffer themselves the agonizing moral pains shown on the screen.

The common link between these three main topics is the manner each event is dealt with: i. e. harassment. If it can be considered bad taste to chase an unfaithful person around without rest, interview his or her relatives or friends, camp hourlong before his or her house in hope of getting a glimpse of the infamous culprit, it is quite appalling to see the way tragic events are treated by the Japanese media. Bereaved families are pursued without mercy, their tearful faces are scrutinized endlessly for the grief which viewers yearn for to satisfy their sadistic hunger. Japanese journalists can show utmost rudeness when interviewing victims of a tragedy. Respect and decency are completely absent when a catastrophe strikes, which, in a nation famous for its politeness and deference to others, is, to say the least, rather surprising. In this aspect, Japanese journalists are very similar to the infamous Italian paparazzi who stalk their victims everywhere with powerful telephoto lenses and then sell their best pictures to the scandal voracious tabloids around the world. But as condemnable as the paparazzi can be, their prey is usually limited to the very rich and famous – royals are their favorite victims – and they do not show any interest in the common people, leaving them alone to their happiness or distress, whereas for their Japanese counterparts, anyone and anything is worth tormenting.

Another characteristic of these shows is their ironic timing: each topic, regardless of its subject, is allotted a certain amount of time it must not overpass, which can lead to the airing of a happy or scandalous event right before or after the reporting of a tragedy. Nevertheless, big catastrophes like the January 17, 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, the March 20, 1995 Tokyo sarin attack in three subway lines, the February 10, 1996 collapse of a tunnel in Hokkaido or the take-off accident of a Garuda DC-10 in Fukuoka on June 13, 1996, are considered a priority and treated nearly without interruption all day long.

In conclusion to these observations, it is obvious that sensationalism holds a great fascination for the Japanese people. This somewhat unpleasant attraction toward sadistic images or scandalous behaviors is a good reminder that, even nowadays, the expression "Panem and circences" ("Bread and circuses") of the Romans is not yet outfashioned.

Also to be noted is that, although not always applied in everyday life, a rigid moral code is still in vigor in Japan: deviating from this path of virtue means public condemnation and chastisement for the guilty ones, provided they are famous. Indeed, if celebrity brings glory and wealth, it also brings a greater obligation to respect the Rules of Japanese society: obligation to be a good son or daughter, obligation to be a good mother (the role of the father does not seem that important...) and a good wife, obligation to be faithful spouses, obligation to be a good and reliable worker. Seeing that those rules (and others) are respected, lies in the hands of the Japanese media who, through the daily television programs, act like a tribunal, praising, judging and condemning the people who have attracted their attention. They are the good conscience of the Japanese people who rely on the elite they pretend to represent to guaranty the morality of our modern times.

Sensationalism and France

The very concept of *Wide Show* does not exist on French television, the waves of which are free of scandal-related programs. The French enjoy laughing at sex-related scandals involving famous personalities but respect their privacy and do not condemn their unorthodox life styles. At the funerals of President François Mitterrand for instance, his illegitimate daughter stood beside her legitimate half-brothers and Mrs Mitterrand in the first row, while Mitterrand's mistress stood a little behind the family.

As far as sensationalism is concerned, the most representative program can be considered to be "*Perdu de vue*" ("*Missing*"), broadcast on the mass orientated TF1. People searching for missing but not yet forgotten loved ones can sometimes be reunited with them thanks to this program. The reunion always takes place in front of the cameras, in a torrent of tears of joy. With a happy ending or not, this program

is sure to offer its viewers plenty of human tragedy, which together with maudlin sentimentality, would certainly be very much appreciated by the Japanese public.

MORBIDITY

Morbidity and Japan

As stated in the introduction, the Japanese are an extremely healthy people. Yet, Japan is obsessed with illness, hospitals and death. This translates into three categories of morbidity-related programs: the medical or pseudo-medical programs aired regularly, the compilation programs from non-fictional violent events like accidents and/or sudden deaths, broadcast in the intermission between the seasonal program change and the fictional soap operas in which hospitals, doctors, nurses and eventually patients are the heroes.

Medical and pseudo-medical shows

The Japanese obsession with illness is apparent in several television programs broadcast daily. There are two kinds of medical-related programs: the programs with a sound medical basis and the pseudo-medical ones with a more ludicrous approach to diseases, or rather their prevention.

The first type specialises in real medical disorders such as skin rashes, hay fever, diabetes or high blood pressure, for example. They can be found mainly on NHK General and NHK Education, which broadcast every evening a program of fifteen minutes called "*Health*".⁹⁾ These programs have a well grounded medical basis, with the interview of physicians answering questions on their specialties. They are usually short and concise. They certainly lack the glamour of the more sophisticated shows with their audiences and famous journalists or personalities on the set, but do offer good basic information on the ailment in question. The phraseology is simple, which is by the way a common link between all these shows, but the explanations are accurate and easy to understand by the general public. The aim of the program is not only to explain the disease and its causes, but also to offer a simple cure to it, based on a healthier way of life.

The pseudo-medical shows may be more attractive to the general public because of their ludicrous approach to the disease, but very often the medical information they offer lacks of veracity or is oversimplified. One of the most representative of these programs is "*Omoikkiri terebi*",¹⁰⁾ aired daily from 12:00 p. m. to 1:55 p. m. on Nihon Broadcasting Television. This show is composed of two parts, usually a medical-related segment at the beginning and a cooking lesson at the end, with no

9) 「健康」

10) 「おもいきりテレビ」

link whatsoever with the ailment treated beforehand. Occasionally, the medical part of the program is replaced by a completely different subject, like, for example, gardening. The newscaster is a famous journalist receiving several guests from show business and a physician or a specialist in the topic of the day. The program is pre-recorded in a Tokyo studio with an audience (mainly housewives) on the set. The audience is asked to take an active part in the program: i. e. answering simple quizz-like questions about the problem treated. The point of this program is not to inform scientifically regarding a particular disease, but to prevent it through original, simple and often rather questionable methods, usually based on eating very common foods which are purported to have nearly miraculous and heretofore unknown virtues. Generally, the remedies proposed apply to quite a wide range of ailments and are home remedies one can easily prepare or cook at home. It is puzzling to note that on this kind of ludicrous and often scientifically suspect show, the most frequently discussed disease is cancer prevention. Among the most surprising medical discoveries of the recent months figures, "A surprising effect of chocolate on health! It can even prevent cancer."¹¹⁾ Actually, this remarkable and astonishing discovery seems to have reliable grounds as an article on the good effects of chocolate has been published in a medical review at the beginning of 1996, helping to boost sales of chocolate and cocoa drinks all-over Japan. This kind of program is apparently meant to reassure the extremely health concerned Japanese public and give them hope and confidence in a brighter future.

Medical and pseudo-medical shows are more particularly aimed at a middle-aged or elderly public, already concerned by real health problems. It is by the way interesting to note that in Japan there exists a particular type of illness called "seijin byo"¹²⁾ or "adult disease" which covers a great variety of conditions a 40 year-old and up person can be afflicted with, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and even cancer. But for the younger public the first concern is the very much beloved theme of beauty and fitness. In the beauty-related programs the main aim is to be, to become or to remain slim and slender. This of course is not something unique to Japan, as in western countries fat is the enemy too. One has just to look at super fashion models like Kate Moss or more recently Trish Goff to know how much the "skeletal look" is highly prized and priced. However, in Japan the percentage of fat people is very low and the great majority of young girls or young women would be considered "skinny" according to western standards, which makes it all the more astonishing to see this obsessive desire to fight any extra kilo or superfluous centimeter. The many programs related to slimness offer various methods to lose weight, from acupuncture to drastic diets or miracle soaps, but never guaranty

11) 「チョコレート意外な効果!がんも予防」

12) 成人病

any result, leaving to the public the liberty of judging the accuracy of each treatment. They even present a certain irony toward some incredibly unorthodox and dubious slimming methods like the latest fad which consists of bandaging one's fingers with thin adhesive tapes. According to Chinese medicine, there are acupuncture points representing different parts of the body on each finger: to apply continuous pressure to certain of them is supposed to induce a slimming effect on the waist or thighs, for instance. Since programs have been broadcast on this subject, it is not uncommon to see women, especially middle-aged ones, exhibiting highly bandaged hands in public. This can have a startling effect on people unfamiliar with this "revolutionary treatment", leading them to think these women are really badly hurt.

Non-fictional violence-related programs

This kind of program is not aired on a daily or even a weekly basis, but when regular programs, soap operas or variety shows come to an end, corresponding to seasonal changes. Most of the commercial channels offer a full set of horrors then, broadcast on prime time. Here is one example of a program aired 1 April 1996, from 6:30 p. m. to 7:54 p. m., on Tokyo Television:

"At this very moment, you become a witness to history: people run over by cars! Shot at! Running naked! Then, a special compilation of rescue scenes and the oncoming love and emotion."¹³⁾

This kind of program has no so-called social excuse like the *Wide Shows*, which can at least pretend to inform the public. They are based only on real violence and are supposed to give a harmless kick to voyeurs around Japan. The question of their "harmlessness" is still open to future discussion as one cannot pretend to show children real tragedies (let us not forget that these programs are aired on prime time) without harming them. Violence on television, especially violence coming from the Japanese Manga (cartoons), is condemned right or wrong world-wide, but this kind of fictional violence is certainly less traumatic to children than the violence shown in real life through these shows. Moreover, this kind of program tends to lessen the effect of violence, accidents and tragedies. People, especially children, may become accustomed to seeing grisly events without reflecting about their importance in real life. These sadistic programs cannot pretend to be enjoyable or bring anything interesting or new to the life of the viewers and one can but wonder about their "raison d'être" in such a nice and secure society as the Japanese one is considered to be.

13) 「一挙公開!!世界の衝撃映像「この瞬間あなたは歴史の証人になる」人がはねられる!射殺される!全裸で走る!そして愛と感動の救出シーン特集」

Medical-related soap operas

Hospitals, doctors and nurses hold a formidable attraction in many countries around the world. Shows like *General Hospital*, *ER* or *Chicago Hope* are good examples of the international interest in medical dramas, above all in anglo-saxon countries. It is interesting to note that the introduction of American hospital dramas on Japanese television is recent, as *ER* has been introduced on NHK BS 2 from April 1996 every Monday evening and *Chicago Hope* on Asahi Television Network every Wednesday on the 8:00 p. m. prime time.

As for the Japanese home-made hospital dramas, they can be divided into two kinds: the parody type and the realistic one.

A recent parody type drama, called "*Handsome man*",¹⁴⁾ was aired every Monday from 8:00 p. m. to 9:00 p. m., from January to the end of March 1996. This drama presented all the stereotypes of the genre with the heroes being a young, rich, bright and handsome doctor and a demure and pretty nurse. Gravitating around them were wicked and envious doctors but also physicians devoted to their patients, strict and unfriendly nurses but also kind and generous ones, and of course, very ill patients who would always be cured and leave the hospital smiling. Actually, the young handsome doctor gave up his promising future as head surgeon of the hospital he was working in, married the pretty demure nurse and became a simple home-doctor, far-away from glittering Tokyo.

This drama was a comic parody of life and human relationships in a hospital and it made fun of Japanese doctors who too often consider themselves, and are considered by their patients, as all-mighty god-like figures always to be trusted and admired.

In this drama the plot did not center on "illness" but the social standard of doctors in Japanese life. This drama's main quality, if any, was its humor in making fun of the established system, a system destroyed when the handsome doctor rejected it and escaped from Tokyo with his young bride. The nurse too was different from Japanese young females as she was not attracted by the stereotypical rich and famous doctor. They did not abandon medicine, but together chose another more human approach to their ambitions.

A very popular realistic hospital-related drama was "*Surgeon: Matasaburo Huiragi*",¹⁵⁾ broadcast every Thursday evening from 9:00 p. m. to 10:00 p. m., during the fall of 1995. The hero was a very gifted middle-aged surgeon. Apart from his great ability in the medical domain, he was also a nice man with a good sense of humor. Last but not least, he was a widower living with his 20 year-old daughter. His colleagues were all younger doctors with promising futures, among them an in-

14) 「ハンサムマン」

15) 「外科医：柊又三郎」

telligent, sensible and single female, secretly in love with him. In the last episode, she actually managed to become engaged to be married to him.

The two plot lines of this drama were illness, described with a certain realism, and human relationships in a hospital. As in the preceding parody drama, all the usual stereotypes were there: good doctors versus bad ones, a demure nurse in love with a doctor and ailing patients famous Doctor Hiiragi almost always managed to save. This drama could be considered a realistic one because of the way illness and medical treatment were described. However, it did not titillate the sadistic fibre of viewers as it did not dwell on showing emotional or physical sufferings. Moreover, although this program could not be considered a parody, Doctor Hiiragi's humor gave it a special comical tone usually absent from the ordinary hospital-related dramas.

At the beginning of July 1996, two new hospital-related serials, a realistic type called "*Pediatrics department*",¹⁶⁾ broadcast on Thursdays, and parody type called "*A nurse's work*",¹⁷⁾ broadcast on Tuesdays, premiered. Added to *ER* on Mondays and *Chicago Hope* on Wednesdays, these dramas will certainly give a hypochondriac sufficient illness and injury to fill his or her week with a great variety of new anxieties.

Apart from hospital soap operas, the central themes of which are doctors and their lives in a hospital, Japanese television has a wide range of illness-related dramas to offer its viewers, like the one broadcast on May 31, 1996, at 9:00 p. m., called "*Do make us a family again, please !*".¹⁸⁾ Its story read as follows: "A trading company employee and his wife desperately try to find a marrow donor for their leukemia-stricken son." (Asahi Evening News, May 5, 1996). As far as illness is concerned, leukemia is actually a very much beloved and often treated theme and Japanese television does not hesitate to use it repeatedly in its dramas. A reason for this overuse may lay in the tragedies of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which caused so many leukemia cases among the inhabitants of these two cities. In addition, leukemia is a disease which can strike children and adults alike. It is notable that a disease like AIDS or the fate of HIV positive patients have not yet been treated in any Japanese television drama, although these two topics are unfortunately very much spoken of all over the world.

Ordinary dramas are not always exempt of the morbid touch hospitals or illness bring to them. In June 1996 alone, there were at least three serials a week on prime time, the morbidity of which was striking. Though none of these dramas were directly hospital-related, hospital or illness irrupted into them abruptly. In "*The Iguana's Daughter*",¹⁹⁾ a female high school student and the mother of the "iguana" looking

16) 「小児病棟」

17) 「ナースのお仕事」

18) 「家族にまたしてね」

19) 「イグアナの娘」

young girl were run over and killed in road accidents with the incumbent hospital scenes and sorrow stricken families. The even more morbid "*Adolescence*"²⁰⁾ was full of bloody fights, accidents, operation scenes and an attempted murder on a comatose youngster by her desperate mother. "*The Invisible Man*";²¹⁾ although it could be categorized as a comic drama, got its touch of hospital-doctor-operation-death scenes with a blind young girl who succumbed after undergoing treatment in a science fiction like institution.

This short review of the use and overuse of morbidity by Japanese television would not be complete without mentioning the program aired on June 8, 1996 from 7:00 p. m. to 9:00 p. m., in "*Super special '96*"²²⁾ on Nihon Broadcasting Television. It was difficult to categorize as it did not fall either in the category of "sensationalism" or "medical-related programs" or "soap operas", but its subject did make it a morbid one. Its review read as follows, "Emotional Babylympic: My baby is No 1 (...) Save Mommy! Snow White's adventures".²³⁾ The game, as it was meant to be a "game", consisted of making three to four-year old children save their mothers who, like Snow White in the fairy-tale, had eaten a poisonous apple and "died" suddenly in front of their horrified offspring. The toddlers had to overcome their grief, for they did believe their mother were dead, then accomplish a series of endurance tests such as carrying an ice-cream without eating it, and finally bring their "dead" mothers a miraculous remedy which was to revive them. All the children shown on TV achieved their mission and were happily reunited with their mothers, who beamed with pride of having so courageous and reliable little darlings. The audience assembled in the Tokyo studio, composed of show business personalities, openly wept with emotion. However nobody seemed to think of the trauma inflicted purposely by the willing mothers on their children just for the sake of appearing on TV. Nobody seemed to realize the gravity of the impact of lying to children, nor the forthcoming difficulties of teaching them "not to do as Mommy did" but to be good and never ever tell any lie. Nobody seemed to fathom what might have happened (and may have happened off-record) to children who did not succeed in reviving their mothers. Nobody seemed to have considered the shock, the grief, the terrible sentiment of being responsible for one's mother's life and finally the possible guilt feeling of the children, victims of the greed and stupidity of the adults. This program is a lamentable proof that for many Japanese, life and death are a kind of game, not to be treated too seriously.

20) 「若葉のころ」

21) 「透明人間」

22) 「スーパースペシャル '94」

23) 「感動のベビリンカップ “私の赤ちゃん No 1” (...) ママを救え! 白雪姫大冒険」

Morbidity and France

Compared to Japanese television, French television appears to be very tame as far as medical-related programs are concerned. Though there is actually a program called "*Attention santé*" ("*Health watch !*") broadcast daily on Channel 5 (La Cinquième) at 1:30 p. m., it lasts only five to ten minutes. Other medical-related programs, like a series on infant early life and diseases, a program on spasmodic tics or one on obesity for instance, could be seen on TF1 or the more elitist France 3 in the spring of 1996. They were long, very much specialised medical documentaries (about one hour and a half) and often, though not always, aired late at night, around 10:30 p. m., which meant they did not target a lot of spectators. Compared to Japanese television's numerous medical shows aimed at a large viewing audience, French ones are fewer and certainly less popular, although not of a lower quality.

Medical soap operas can be found on French waves too. But as far as serials are concerned they are usually not "made in France", but rather foreign productions. Examples of this could be "*Le médecin de famille*" ("*The home doctor*"), a German produced drama aired on TF1 twice daily or "*Urgences*" ("*E. R.*"), the famous American serial, broadcast on France 2 at the 8:55 p. m. prime time every Thursday. There are also dramas with a medical background that are not serials. They are called "téléfilms" and can be of various origins. It is interesting to point out that, contrary to Japan, the problem of AIDS is dealt with on television, like in the American film of John Gray (1993), called in French "*La dernière chance*" ("*The last chance*") about the relationship between an AIDS stricken biological mother of a little girl and a nurse who wishes to adopt the child. In any case, it is obvious that French television is less obsessed with health, illness and morbidity than its Japanese counterpart. However, one cannot deny the great popularity of foreign made medical-related productions as mentioned above.

It is a fact that Japanese television offers its viewers a wide range of sensational or scandalous programs, together with morbid ones, programs the Japanese are very fond of. It is a fact too that television programs all over the world are made to please the public and that popularity is the most looked after criterion to gauge a success. Television is the mirror of the time. If Japanese television and French television differ so much, it is because of the very nature of each society. Obviously, both countries have a different approach to sensationalism and morbidity. As strange as it may seem, revolution prone France shows much more restraint in treating scandals and has a less frantic relationship to illness and death than obedient and secure Japan. Indeed French society, with a 12.6% unemployment rate (October 1996) and racial tensions within itself, has certainly more economic and social woes than Japanese society, with its 3.5% unemployment rate and no open racial tensions. With still a bleak future ahead, the French may not be so eager to witness horrors and

tragedies when they relax at home, whereas the Japanese, in the safety of their lives, seem to enjoy a good discharge of adrenaline dispensed by their favorite television programs. However, to what point is Japanese television influenced by its public and to what point are the Japanese influenced by their television is hard to say. One fact is the Japanese like to cry and see people cry in public. Tears of joy or sorrow are good prey for any camera and avid viewer. Finally, one can say that both sensationalism as well as medical morbid dramas can be assimilated to a kind of sadomasochism and voyeurism. A common link between sensationalism and morbidity-related programs is their insistence on showing emotional sufferings rather than physical ones. Gruesome images are seldom if ever aired in the *Wide Shows* and as far as medical dramas are concerned, realism stops before too much blood is spilled. Unlike American dramas where operations are filmed with utmost realism, Japanese ones do not insist on showing medical reality but rather prefer to suggest it. The Asahi Evening News of May 5, 1996 reported that the operation scenes in the American series "*Chicago Hope*" had been edited to conform to the sensibility of the Japanese public. Although open heart surgery can hardly be considered a pleasant spectacle, emotional pains of bereaved families resulting from real or fictitious tragedies are certainly more unbearable to watch, as one can identify better with ordinary people's sufferings than with the obviously fake hemoglobin spilled on the screen. Unspoken or rampant violence can also be more devastating than the simple view of blood. Furthermore, if television is considered to be a mirror to society, it is astonishing to discover that in the safe and stable Japanese society of nowadays, so many tragedies appeal to so many people. Unless Japanese society is not so safe or stable after all...

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TV Guide²⁶⁾

24) ヴューズ, 1996 Vol. 6 N. 7 「ワイドショーそれでもここまでやるか!」

25) 朝日新聞

26) TV ガイド

Télé 7 JOURS
TV MAGAZINE LE FIGARO
LE POINT

On a monthly basis:
TV Taro²⁷⁾

27) TV Taro