

THE MANGA CULTURE

Fantasy and reality in Japanese comic art

Japan is a nation of contradictions. To western eyes the Japanese may appear very staid and aloof, yet some respects of their culture are considered shocking in western society. One of the most important aspects of Japanese culture is comics or 'manga'. Ever since the 7th century humorous prints and wood-cuts (the word 'manga' was first used by a wood block artist to describe his pictures) had been produced to amuse the masses. In 1862 Charles Wirgman introduced the Japanese 'Punch' and paved the way for artists to experiment with western styles such as shading and using a pen instead of a brush. This eventually led to many of

comics for children and adults alike.

At the same time another movement was evolving. This was a darker grittier world brought about by a rise in nationalism and the 'Spirit of Japan'. Tales of Samurais became very popular with grim art depicting decapitations and graphic sex. These books were aimed at an adult audience and were given the name 'gekiga' ('drama pictures') to differentiate them from the more traditional manga. Other titles started to appear about spys, assassins and ninjas all with liberal doses of sex and violence.

Yet behind all of this turmoil there is a strong moral ethic, which is almost paradoxical; firstly the Japanese do not believe in the suppression of sex and violence and would rather see it commit-

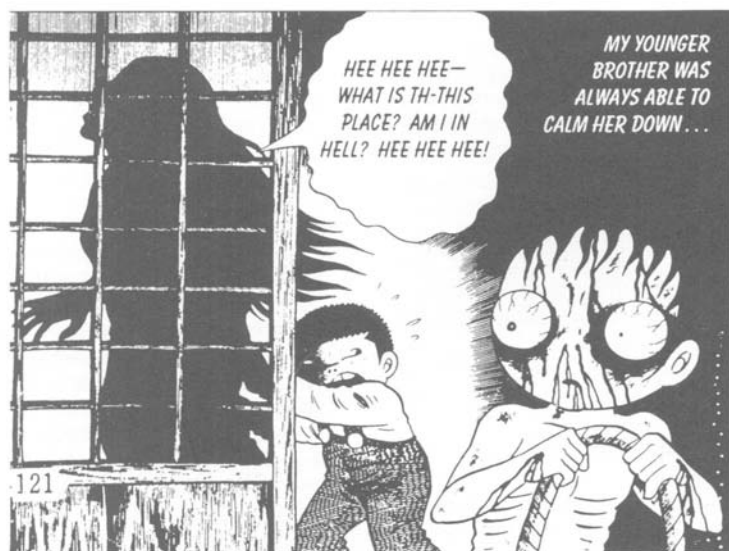
popular with school girls. One editor explained that "... at that age girls have a great deal of curiosity about the opposite sex... (these stories) are so remote from their own reality that they don't feel threatened by them". Ironically the law that prevents the depiction of adult genitalia (Article 175 of the Penal Code) has a loophole which allows the portrayal of children's genitalia, thus creating a boom industry in 'Lolita' comics.

How has all this 'creative freedom' affected the Japanese state of mind? To the casual Western observer Japan seems to have a low degree of reported murder or rape, yet a closer examination reveals a very different story. For example it is generally known that businessmen occasionally molest school girls on the commuter trains, yet nothing is said or done by either the victim or molester because Japanese protocol teaches them not to disclose. It appears that what is actively encouraged in manga and fantasy is desperately suppressed and concealed when the same happens in reality.

In 1989 this most glaring anomaly came to the fore. Tsutomu Miyazaki, a 27 year old printer's apprentice was arrested for the abduction, sexual assault and mutilation of four young girls. In his defence he claimed that he could no longer differentiate between fantasy and reality due to the fact that he watched hundreds of violent animation films and read pornographic mangas. Miyazaki belonged to a fast rising generation of young men who call themselves 'otaku'. Socially unskilled they are loners who spend their free time playing video games, watching animation and reading violent manga. Although the 'otaku' deny that Miyazaki was ever truly one of them, it does suggest that many of Japan's youth are in danger of becoming nihilist and anti-social. Indeed in the early eighties there were several cases reported where young men murdered their parents.

Japan, in so many ways, is very progressive. However until it can clearly draw the line between fact and fiction it is likely to experience increasingly disturbed psycho-sexual behaviour amongst its young people.

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"Child Pornography and Mutilation is considered acceptable in Japanese comics." *Panorama of Hell* (Japanese Title: Jigoku Hen) © Hideshi Hino

the styles found in modern manga today. Throughout the 1920s the humour magazines boomed and the first of what was to be a long line of erotic comics was created by Saseo Ono, known as eno-guro-nansensu meaning erotic-grotesque-nonsensical. Unlike the rest of the world Japan never regarded comics as solely for children and consequently they were never perceived as 'childish'. The modern manga industry developed after World War Two. Creators like Osamu Tezuka were influenced by the American comics that the occupying GI's brought with them and by Disney's animation films and they started producing

ted to paper (in a therapeutic way) rather than committed in reality; secondly they refuse to allow any genitalia to be visible during a sex scene, thus causing the artist to draw near impossible body contortions or just to ignore the fact that a man has a penis. Further contradictions occur when much of the 'whitening out' of penis and pubic hair is done by school girls working for the publishing houses to earn pocket money.

The question arises; who is protecting whom from what? Certainly the public has almost complete access to whatever interests them, from child pornography to homosexual romances which are very