

## Film is Alive:

### The Manga Roots of Osamu Tezuka's Animation Obsession

By Ada Palmer

The “God of Manga” did not have to be an animator. During the war, the young medical student Osamu Tezuka had no other outlet for his pent-up creativity than four-panel gag strips drawn in secret on toilet paper and posted in the munitions factory lavatory. When 1946 saw the end of the wartime ban on “frivolous” publications, the floodgate opened and the characters he had sketched since childhood became dozens, later hundreds of stories which he poured out with a speed and diversity no other comics artist has ever matched. The manga market (Japanese comics) was more than ready for him. Traumatized and malnourished child readers, who came out of the war hungry for hope and distraction, latched at once onto the “red books” (*akahon*) whose bright covers and escapist adventure stories transported them, however briefly, out of the ashes and starvation which dominated their post-war reality. Hiroshima-survivor Keiji Nakazawa is one of hundreds who remember sitting amid the rubble, reading and re-reading Tezuka's *New Treasure Island* (*Shin Takarajima*, 1946) and its successors, which offered not only fantastic entertainment but two kinds of hope: societal hope that the nuclear technology which had so devastated Japan might now build a better future, one of flying cars and robot heroes; individual hope that, after suffering so much, a child might still have something exciting to aspire to, to become a *manga-ka* (manga artist). As the industry bloomed, even Tezuka, whose output averaged a staggering six pages per day his entire working life, could not come close to satisfying the demand. By 1960 the flow of fame, fan letters, publishers' pleas, and, of course, profit, was constant, and, in the middle of all this, the man who never had fewer than a dozen manga projects going at once decided to found an animation studio.

Tezuka's famous statement that, if manga was his bride, animation was his mistress does little to explain why he chose to divert such massive energies into the affair. Certainly there is a natural alliance between the sequential drawings which populate comics and those which form animation's illusory motion. Certainly too there is fame and fortune to be made from film and television. It would have been perfectly natural for Tezuka to license his stories to networks, or work with the extant studios of Japan's nascent post-war animation industry, as he did in 1960 when Toei adapted his 1952 *Boku no Son Goku* manga into their film *Saiyuki* (released in the US in 1961 as *Alakazam the Great*). Even his decision in 1961 to found his own studio, Tezuka Osamu Productions (soon renamed Mushi Productions), might be attributed to a simple entrepreneurial streak, but not what he did with it. He poured his time into the studio, setting an inhuman production schedule which had his animators sleeping under their desks and working until their fingers bled (his were already too callused from constant drawing to bleed). He poured his fortune into the studio, selling episodes to networks at significantly under cost, so that even the famous 1963 *Astro Boy* TV series, the first television anime and one of the greatest marketing successes in Japanese history, consumed the equivalent of several thousand dollars per episode, paid for from Tezuka's own pocket. Mushi Pro did not make its founder rich, nor was it necessary to make him known, as manga after manga cemented his position as the unrivaled Godfather of Japanese comics. Tezuka's animation studio, then, was less an investment than an experiment, his artistic and directorial choices driven by a set of very specific goals, the same goals we see him pursuing, often with more success, in his manga career. The “God of Manga” did not revolutionize the Japanese comics industry without experiments, nor without failure, so it

is to Tezuka's experimental manga that we must look to understand why he was not satisfied with his "bride" alone.

Manga existed in Japan before Tezuka, before the war, before the twentieth century or even the nineteenth. As recent histories like those of Adam Kern and Brigitte Koyama-Richard are making clearer, illustrated stories have flourished in Japan for a full millennium, nurtured by Japan's early acquisition of printing technology and the similarities between the techniques necessary to reproduce its pictorial writing system and those suited to printing images. As early as the eighth century, hand-painted *emakimono* picture scrolls, a form borrowed from China, presented scenes and stories through long strips of sequential images, usually without text, in genres comedic, satirical, religious and folkloric. In the seventeenth century, middle-class desire for affordable decoration, entertainment, images of celebrities and, inevitably, pornography created a market for reproducible *ukiyo-e* art prints, vivid and often narrative and filled with the dramatic motion, bright colors and fantastic subjects which still dominate today's manga medium. In the eighteenth century, pamphlet-like ten page *kibyoshi* brought sequential graphic stories into the more familiar book format, though these still consisted of narrative text crammed around illustrations, rather than having the action and dialogue flow through sequential panels as in modern comics. In the same period, artists like Hokusai produced more "whimsical" prints on paper, both single images and narrative collections, referred to now for the first time as "manga". In the early twentieth century, manga proliferated in the forms of satirical cartoons and comedic postcards, sometimes independent but often printed in magazines, where their releases, though not their narratives, were serial. Children's magazines appeared, and children's manga in colorful comic strip supplements, some as much as twenty-four pages long, which were included as inserts in women's magazines for mothers to read with their children. In the years leading to the war, manga reached the form we know now, with word bubbles, sequential panels and even science-fictional themes, as in *The Exploration of Mars (Kasei Tanken, 1940, by Oshiro Noboru and Asahi Taro)*. What, then, did Osamu Tezuka contribute to earn the title of "God" of a genre which had already existed for 1,000 years?

His first contribution, and what made him a staggering force well before his flirtations with animation, was Tezuka's revolutionary "cinematic" visual style. Pre-war manga magazines, like their *ukiyo-e* and *kibyoshi* predecessors, had a characteristically static panel structure. An individual image of a blasting rocket or pouncing demon might be full of dramatic swirls and colors, but sequential images tended to be set on the same static background and framed from the same repeated point of view, like the scenes of a play where the actors move but the viewer remains static. Panels too tended to be the same shape, the dominant form being the still-popular four panel strip; today many American newspaper comic strips employ a similarly static, theatrical visual frame. Tezuka's manga were not theatrical, but cinematic. His point of view did not remain static but zoomed in, looked up, down, peered through foreshortened cracks, whooshed through motion-blurs, showed close-ups, panoramas, characters reflected in dripping blood or staring eyes, all the dynamic visual tricks which separate film from stage. His panel shapes changed too: long: narrow, framed by architecture, fading into darkness, huge panels for vistas of space colonies and tiny ones for a quick punch line. The difference between cinematic and theatrical panel layout may seem like a minor innovation compared with issues of genre or figure style, but the effect was much like when Hitchcock interwove seventy-seven different camera angles in the *Psycho* shower scene, so shocking a world that had not before realized what

power film had to shock. For the hungry children in the rubble, the fantasies they escaped to had suddenly come half to life.

Tezuka's cinematic revolution had its root in cinema, and in his childhood. When young Osamu was a schoolboy, his progressive and Westward-looking father bought the first movie projector to be brought to their small home town. His enterprise (much like his son's) was not entrepreneurial. Yukata Tezuka wanted to help his community look outward, beyond local and even Japanese concerns, to an international future, one in which he believed cinema would be a crucial cultural force. Young Osamu and his brother and sister grew up amid the wild adventures of John Wayne, the aristocratic melodramas of Charles Boyer, the fist-fast heroics of Lino Ventura, and, of course, cartoons. Disney is the most conspicuous influence, both in the Disney-esque pastoral animals and princesses conspicuous throughout Tezuka's work, and in his anecdotes about family excursions to movie theaters in Osaka. Yukata Tezuka's primary hobby was photography, but he also drew comics for his own enjoyment, read imported European comics and encouraged the whole family to sketch together. In a period when most of young Tezuka's peers were exposed to little more than hastily-edited news and propaganda reels, the child who was always tucked in with a pencil and sketchbook at his bedside grew up steeped in Western comics and Western film.

After the publication of *New Treasure Island*, Tezuka's cinematic style was instantly taken up by others, and would not alone have kept him at the top of the manga world. His second great contribution came in his constant experimentation with new genres. Pre-war manga had had variety, of course, particularly variety in its target audience: manga for boys, for girls, for women. What Tezuka tried was different: a constant and systematic attempt to break into genre after genre and prove that manga could do more than entertain. Manga could introduce Japanese readers to great works of Western literature, like *Crime and Punishment* (1953), *Faust* (1950) and the variety of plays, from Shakespeare to Ibsen, showcased in *Rainbow Parakeet (Nanairo Inko, 1981-3)*. Manga could raise public awareness about environmental issues (*Kimba the White Lion, 1950-4*), about disability and the corruption of the Japanese medical system (*Black Jack, 1973-83*), and educate girls about menstruation and sexual harassment (*The Marvelous Melmo, 1970-2*). Archaeology (*The Three-Eyed One, 1974-8*), music history (*Ludwig B, 1987-9*), mental illness (*Barbara, 1973-4*), apartheid (*Ode to Kirihito, 1970-1*), religion (*Buddha, 1972-82*), incest (*Ayako, 1972-3*), even the war, the touchiest subject an author could tackle in post-War Japan, could be tackled by manga (*Adolf, 1983-5*). *Astro Boy*, generally discussed in the West as a work of techno-utopianism and a way to recast atomic power in a positive light, was also largely about racial intolerance, as we see when our robot hero is called upon to defend robots' rights to vote or run for office, or to intervene in the Cambodian genocide. Like any experiments, some failed. Tezuka had flops, cancelled series, titles too strange for any but the most devoted readers, and those who knew him can testify he did not take these flops, or their financial consequences, well. Still, Tezuka did not have to gamble on new works. He could have continued milking the big sellers like *Astro Boy* forever, and with so many *Astro Boy* remakes one can argue that he did, but he also never stopped pouring his energies into new, experimental titles with no guarantee of success. In the '40s and '50s the new trails Tezuka blazed were followed by hundreds of young artists who developed single experiments into whole subgenres. In the '60s and '70s, as Tezuka became the establishment figure against whom younger generations of *manga-ka* reacted, his continued experimentation forced them to push

even farther if they wanted to escape the master's shadow. Tezuka would not sit complacent, so neither could the manga world.

At this point, animation seems an obvious venture for an artist raised on film and dedicated to taking his form in new directions, but it is still curious that the author who never had enough time to draw all the manga he imagined, and was frequently and fiercely jealous of potential rivals, would divert precious energies away from his struggle to remain at the top of the manga world. Why would the man who watched sales like a hawk, and was easily infuriated by financial failures, squander his hard-earned fortunes on animation that sold below cost? The experimental short films which launched his studio were not Disney-esque cartoons, nor film adaptations of his bestselling manga. Each vignette demonstrated a completely different and original art style, and while their writing was often whimsical and their lengths comparable to Mickey Mouse's early adventures, the subjects were as dark as can be: sex and murder (*Male*, 1962), impermanence and human extinction (*Memory*, 1964), imagination and totalitarian thought-control (*Mermaid*, 1964). The studio's debut centerpiece, *Tales of a Streetcorner* (1962), looks nothing like Tezuka's work or, really, like manga, but uses broad color blocks, more like paper cutouts than ink drawings. The subject matter is recognizably Tezuka's, nature and romance threatened by war and the cycle of destruction by fire and eventual rebirth which recurs in so many of his works. Every element of the film, shapes without outlines, action without dialogue, violence without characters, is experimental, and not the kind of experiment an entrepreneur would choose to launch a money-making studio. *Tales of a Streetcorner* is a film created to show what film can do, and even as Mushi Pro moved on to works which were tie-ins to profitable and established series, the desire to show what film can do continued to dominate the decision-making process. In 1963 *Astro Boy* TV proved Japan could produce an animated series, but at enormous physical and financial cost. *Cleopatra* in 1970 (released in the US as *Cleopatra: Queen of Sex*) was not only Japan's first sexually explicit animated film but combined that sensualist experiment with a vast array of art styles, including reprocessed live action footage, and jarringly disparate subject matter: slapstick humor mixed with gang-rape, extreme violence with pop culture jokes, Roman history with far future time travel; the result is jumbled and erratic, but leaves the viewer with one clear message: look what animation can do! Tezuka worked only on the concept stages of Mushi Pro's 1973 flop *Belladonna* (*Kanashimi no Belladonna*), but the concept of combining Jules Michelet's studies of European witchcraft with the art of Klimt and Aubrey Beardsley to produce stylized animation which looks more like watercolor tarot cards melting across the screen than like a manga proves Mushi Pro's continued dedication to living and, soon thereafter, dying as a studio dedicated to experiment.

Tezuka drifted away from the studio during the production of *Belladonna*, partly due to business tensions with the staff, but also to work more on his manga. As Mushi Pro collapsed, tying up *Astro Boy* and other beloved stories in a decade-long copyright nightmare, the 1970s became a dark period for Tezuka's animation interests, but a particularly rich period for his manga, and especially for the third element which truly cemented his position as "God of Manga": the sophistication of his own philosophical project. While his cinematic art and breadth of genre were in essence structural contributions to the manga art form, directly imitated and then expanded by students, rivals and successors, his philosophy was something more individual.

Like his first fans, Tezuka had lived through the horrors of World War II, then watched the Cold War multiply cruel and wasteful border conflicts while threatening even more complete destruction. He had studied medicine, which should have been the noble art of protecting and preserving life, but he found it frustrated by the apparent cruelty of Nature, by human violence, and by social corruption, the world of class and profit which made it hard to do good where good needed to be done. Tezuka's manga shared with his audience his long and very personal attempts to understand these experiences, and to construct a philosophy which could understand and accept such a world. His basis was Buddhism, and the centerpiece was his magnum opus *Phoenix*, begun in the 1960s, which treats these questions: life, karma, the recurrence of war in human history, whether there is justice behind the suffering, and, above all, reincarnation as the series follows its cast over many lifetimes, cycling from the archaic past to the far future extinction of the human race. Tezuka continued work on *Phoenix* throughout the 1970s and left it unfinished at his death in 1989, but its project expanded far beyond one series. In 1972 Tezuka started the decade-long project *Buddha*, a biographical examination of the foundations of Buddhism. In 1973 he also created *Black Jack*, his most beloved *shonen* series (for adults), focusing on a genius unlicensed surgeon who, letting no law or bureaucracy stall his quest to understand, protect and teach the value of life, was the idealized doctor Tezuka could not be in the real world.

While the 1970s saw the richest outpouring of philosophy in Tezuka's manga career, war, life and death were not new themes for him, and as much as *Phoenix* did to expound new ideas it did more to highlight the philosophy already present in Tezuka's earlier works. The core cast of *Phoenix*, the characters whose reincarnations Tezuka traced from past to future, were not new but familiar faces who had appeared in Tezuka's manga in the '60s, '50s, some as early as his childhood drawings. Ever thinking in terms of movie studios, Tezuka used what he called his "Star System," a cast of regular "actors" who appeared repeatedly in different stories, some even based on the stars of his childhood: John Wayne, Charles Boyer, Lino Ventura. This "Star System" connected all his works. Kenichi, the boy hero of *New Treasure Island*, also explored the future of *Metropolis*, appeared on Black Jack's operating table, and went to school with Astro Boy. Saruta, the central figure of *Phoenix*, who for a great crime was sentenced to spend every reincarnation ugly, ostracized and struggling alone to understand life's secrets, did so not only in each *Phoenix* chapter but in *Black Jack*, in earlier stories like *Dororo* (1967-8), and again at Siddhartha's side in *Buddha*. The effect of *Phoenix* on this "Star System" was to weave together every Tezuka story, all 150,000 pages, into a single elaborated portrait of the Buddhist karmic Nature he sought to explore. Unpunished crimes or unmerited sufferings in one series were punished or earned in another, and apparent injustices were tied back inexorably to the universal cycle of creation and destruction and the human instinct toward violence which Tezuka depicted in *Phoenix*, and tried to develop into a constructive philosophy for living in its companion series *Buddha*. *Buddha* was another experiment which was never a financial hit in Japan but has received worldwide literary acclaim, particularly in India and in the West. *Phoenix*, on the other hand, has been embraced in Japan and abroad as Tezuka's masterwork, while Tezuka's life-defending alter-ego Black Jack remains one of the most popular creations in manga history.

There are many kinds of "stars" in the "Star System," character actors, romantic leads, villains, but the most prevalent are the scientists: Optimistic Dr. Ochanomizu, grim Dr. Tenma, august Dr.

Frankenstein, experienced Dr. Yamadano, cynical Dr. Kiriko, wise and lonely Dr. Honma/Saruta exhausted in pursuit the secrets of life. Astro Boy himself is a scientific experiment, as is the patchwork Dr. Black Jack who also performs experiments with every operation. Science appears almost universally in Tezuka's works, always revolving around the creation of life, whether by bringing A.I.s closer to sentience, harvesting the organs of five dead babies to save a dying sixth, or rearing a new race in an artificial womb. Even in historical pieces, where robots and cloning would be out of place, we see the quest to create life in colonists who struggle to raise crops and families, shamans who commix magic and philosophy in search of truth and healing, and the quest for the blood of the Phoenix which grants eternal life. By pulling in past and present examples (as well as imagined future ones) Tezuka argues for a human instinct to create life, existing in parallel to the destructive drives which inevitably bring history back to war and conflict. It is here that the atomic robot Astro, originally Atom, is indeed an attempt to re-imagine nuclear power as a creative force, part of a larger argument that science itself is evidence of a universal human drive toward life. However cruel it may be that history is full of suffering, karmically merited and often manmade but cruel nonetheless, the presence of a proved life instinct was the consolation Tezuka used to try to come to terms with the horror he and his readers had witnessed in the war and after.

“Roar, Solomon!” is a late *Black Jack* story about a young animator struck down by life-threatening cancer (issue #225, August 14, 1978, vol. 13 Vertical/Akita/Asuka, vol. 21 Hazard/Shounen Champion). The young man's room, plastered with posters of Phoenix and other Tezuka icons, marks him as one of that generation drawn to the industry by Tezuka's own animation experiments, and the white lion “Solomon” he slaves over cell by cell we recognize from Tezuka's *Kimba*. Shortly before he is hospitalized, the excited young artist brings a mountain of 500 completed cells to the studio, only to have the director tell him that shooting 500 cells is too expensive; the studio will stick with minimal motion stretched out by re-using just few cells (a technique Tezuka himself pioneered working on *Astro Boy*). The artist insists that such stiff animation can never make the lion truly “alive”, but a tight budget gives them no other choice; this is an acknowledgment of what Miyazaki and other industry leaders have called “Tezuka's Curse,” the artificially low prices networks expect to pay for animation, set when Tezuka sold the original *Astro Boy* under cost, and which still force the industry to maintain its exhausting schedules, cost-cutting and low salaries. In the hospital, the despondent young man lacks any will to live, and is fading fast until Black Jack, who never underestimates the healing power of a patient's will, has the 500 cells shot at his own expense and shows the video to the young man. “If the lion has practically come to life,” he warns, “it's pointless if you die.” The sight of his creation live on screen restores the patient's strength, but, in another acknowledgement of the staggering expense of animation, Dr. Black Jack, who does not flinch at chartering a jet or buying an entire hospital just to save a life, complains that he has never spent so much on one patient.

Of course, fans who know the “Star System” will recognize this young man, Miyamoto Musashi, named for the famous Samurai, as the star of the 1958 manga *The Film Lives On* (*Firumu wa Ikiteru*, also translated *The Film is Alive*). This chronicle of a young man led to Tokyo by dreams of becoming an animator was based on Tezuka's own experience working for Toei on *Saiyuki*. Tokyo's veteran animators tell young Musashi his animation does not have enough “vitality” to succeed; it is not “alive”. He persists, and after many setbacks, including having his

work burned and his sight half-destroyed, Musashi's ultimate success comes when he makes a story about Ao, the horse he loved in his hometown. His passion to restore his precious Ao to life lets him finally create a film that truly "lives." It is no leap here to see a parallel to Astro's creator Dr. Tenma, who is able to make the world's first truly lifelike A.I. only when trying to recreate his lost son Tobio. Musashi animates Ao and Solomon as Dr. Tenma animated Astro Boy, and as Tezuka too animated Astro Boy with so much effort, expense and love.

Tezuka loved "animation", not only in the media sense but the literal one: the act of bringing something to life. The passion to pursue it was not simply storytelling but a redemptive art, like science, part of the creative instinct which was the only thing which made our warlike race forgivable. Manga could communicate much, story, passion, philosophy, but it could not move or seem to live and breathe as young Osamu had seen Disney's creations do on those childhood trips to Osaka. It may be an artificial life, false on the silver screen, but Astro Boy too was artificial life, and Tezuka has told us not to hold prejudice against life unlike our own.

Experiment is the heart of Tezuka's understanding of creation: Saruta's experiments to create life, Black Jack's to save it, and Tezuka's, in manga and in animation, to create and drive others to create. *Tales of a Street Corner* and *Cleopatra* were a message, not for the market, but for creative youths like Musashi, who Tezuka knew were already eager to follow him: look what you can animate, what you can bring to life. Tezuka would never have given up his art to practice medicine, but in his depictions of Black Jack's one sees a kind of nostalgia for the savior-of-lives he could have been. Rather than let that redemptive instinct stagnate, Tezuka channeled it into the closest thing to life he could make: animation.

Reading Tezuka's 1978 story of young Musashi saved from cancer by the strength he drew seeing his precious Solomon roar to animated life, one cannot fight off the image of the real cancer which brought Tezuka himself to just such a hospital bed in 1989. Tezuka had no Black Jack to save him, and his own will to live, strengthened by the sight of the hundreds of animated friends he had created, was not enough to overcome the medical reality. His famous dying prayer that he be allowed to live and keep working is a frustrating final message, especially when his work so poignantly depicts his own attempts to accept the Buddhist principle of resignation; in *Buddha* Tezuka even depicted himself at Siddhartha's side humbly hoping to absorb his message of acceptance, but he drew himself at the same time in *Black Jack* sharing the dark doctor's fierce and angry passion to live on. But the film does live on, as Tezuka said, and the industry he revolutionized lives on, creating millions of animated lives and touching millions of viewers with its creative force. Tezuka's philosophical messages, and his political messages about tolerance, pacifism and environmentalism, also live, through the international reception of his work, and through many fellow manga-ka and animators who champion the same causes. The Astro Boy that Tezuka brought to life may not be able to literally swim oceans, fly through space and catch criminals, but he has crossed oceans, touched space through the many astronauts and scientists inspired by his adventures, and done well by his creator-father, and his progressive film-loving grandfather, by using the vehicle of film to travel as an international ambassador of peace.

## Further Reading: (Short Bibliography)

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English: [www.TezukaInEnglish.com](http://www.TezukaInEnglish.com) (includes more extensive bibliography)

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