



This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Article

Title: Transforming the Japanese comic tradition

Creator: Taylor, Z.

Example citation: Taylor, Z. (2014) Transforming the Japanese comic tradition. *Varoom*. **27**, pp. 38-41. 1750-483X.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Submitted version

Official URL: <http://theaoi.com/varoom-mag/back-issues/varoom-27-the-hermenauts/>

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/7070/>



‘Comics,’ the cartoonist Ivan Brunetti observed, ‘are still a relatively young, quite open art form, with a lot of unexplored territory. This is true both in terms of the language itself as well as the subject matter.’ As a new generation re-interprets the medium, there is growing interest in its history of experimentation and what the cartoonist Frank Santoro calls ‘art comics’ (as opposed to ‘literary comics’): ‘expressionistic and sometimes experimental works that often don’t have a clear narrative’. It is in this light that the Japanese artist Seiichi Hayashi’s pioneering manga of the 1960s and 1970s is gaining popularity in North America and Europe. The first of his work to be translated into English was *Red Coloured Elegy*, published by Montreal’s Drawn and Quarterly in 2009. This was followed by an anthology of his shorter experiments, *Gold Pollen and Other Stories*, by the Brooklyn-based PictureBox in 2013. This summer, Breakdown Press in London produced a risograph edition of *Flowering Harbour*.

All of these works were originally made for *Garō*, an alternative manga magazine that launched in 1964. Describing its significance, the comics historian Ryan Holmberg writes, ‘Whether crafting new narrative forms, incorporating visual ideas from contemporary art and film, favouring fresh forms of graphic expression over conventional technical skills... or diving to the depths of vulgarity, *Garō*’s artists repeatedly redefined what it meant to make comics.’ Hayashi debuted in the magazine in 1967 when he was 22 and helped push it into more radical territory.

Inspired by the improvisatory techniques, disjunctive power and existential themes of new wave cinema, Hayashi innovated new forms of comics without direct narratives and introduced to manga a bricolage approach, conflating traditional Japanese styles and pop-cultural references. Although he adopted a different style from story to story, certain themes recur: his relationship with his mother, postwar Japan and critiques of America (these comics were made during the Vietnam war). The cartoonist Chris Lanier has described his work as ‘condensed visual poetry that still feels avant-garde nearly 40 years later’.

Hayashi is a prolific artist. Though he was a prominent figure in Tokyo’s counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, he is primarily known in Japan today for his illustrations for Lotte Koume (‘Little Plum’) candy drops that feature on the packaging. He has produced exhibitions of paintings and erotic drawings alongside set designs for films and illustrations for theatre posters, record sleeves, children’s books and magazines such as *Paper Moon* (edited by the radical filmmaker and writer Shūji Terayama). He has also made a number of animations. He continues to make comics and was one of the first to use computer graphics in manga. This summer, he made a rare visit to London for the launch of *Flowering Harbour*. I met up with

him and his translator Ryan Holmberg in Soho to find out more about his early comics experiments.

Zoë Taylor: You're visiting London for the launch of the 1969 story *Flowering Harbour*. I've heard that this story was inspired by pop songs.

Seiichi Hayashi: A guy comes travelling in from the city and he meets a woman in this town. A mysterious relationship develops between them and he returns back to the city. There are a couple of songs that appear in the manga and they weren't necessarily ones that were popular at the time. I took songs from the postwar period, things that I liked and thought that the lyrics and the sentiment suited the story. Most of my works from that period incorporate popular music from that era or earlier.

ZT: I've read that story-based manga was always aimed at children but around the time that *Garō* launched, there was suddenly a growing interest in manga for adults. Why do you think this happened?

SH: [laughs] It was mostly college students that were reading my work and then the more mainstream magazines started doing specials about this freak phenomena that college students were also reading comics. It was kind of a shock. It became big news. When you go to university, you're expected to read Descartes or Kant or Barthes so what the hell were students doing reading kids' things?

ZT: You started your career as an animator. What led you to start creating works for *Garō*?

SH: Animation paid. So I kept doing animation. I worked for Tōei Animation Studios. They started doing short films that they added to the long films they were making. Sometimes I worked 72 hours straight; eventually my health became bad, so I stopped. I started drawing comics and I felt that compared to other mediums they were really backward. You know, in film there was Godard, the nouvelle vague – they were really pushing things – and in the art world there were things like performance art. I felt that manga had been unexplored as a medium.

ZT: With your work for *Garō*, you started doing things with manga that hadn't been done before. What were your influences?

SH: The manga tradition is like film, in the sense that there's a script and manga artists have some kind of notebook where they've sketched out the story. So, even before they start drawing, there's a very distinct idea of how a narrative is going to come together and they build up images based on that written story. What I wanted to do was something more

performative, where you start with an image and you build up from there. My colleague Maki Sasaki, who also published work in *Garo*, was also doing some very experimental things with narrative but I went even further in that direction. I would just draw pictures and then put them together, so there's this idea that you start with the picture and you build up not necessarily a story but a kind of image base.

ZT: American comics entered Japan in the postwar period. Their characters occasionally appear in your stories and seem deliberately out of place (Superman and Batman feature in *Yamanba Lullaby*, for example). Can you say something about the American comics that were around – did you read them, were they in any way influential? And what were your feelings about the US influence in Japan after World War II?

SH: Well, first of all, Japan lost the war! [Laughter] I'm going to talk about this at the event on Tuesday [the launch of Flowering Harbour] but there's a British film from the 1960s called *The Loved One*, about an English man criticising American culture. These films that were not American were talking about American culture ironically and critically. I used Superman in a similar way... When I was a teenager, I was far more interested in English films than American films.

ZT: Did you draw completely from your imagination when you were doing the work for *Garo*?

SH: I started with different things – some were from imagination. What I always did unconsciously was start somewhere and develop a kind of style. As soon as I perfected the style I was going for, I would intentionally cancel it and start again from scratch. That was my working method.

ZT: And is it the same now?

SH: I want to maintain some sort of central amateur quality to the process when I start over.

ZT: Because it keeps things fresh?

SH: The process of creating a style in itself is very moving for me. That's my main inspiration for creating artwork so I want to capture that process but I also want my work to communicate the process of creating a style.

ZT: You're still making animations occasionally for commercials. With comics, you can't show every movement; you have to be selective and you seem to enjoy exploiting those gaps between panels. How do you find working in the different mediums? Do you have a preference?

SH: Most people probably focus on one medium and do as much as they can within it. I'm interested in the limits of each medium – the most that one can do within that medium and then where those limits touch one another.

Seiichi Hayashi's answers were translated by Ryan Holmberg.

Flowering Harbour is available from Breakdown Press
www.breakdownpress.com

Gold Pollen and Other Stories is available from PictureBox
www.pictureboxinc.com