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## Gekiga as a site of intercultural exchange: Tatsumi Yoshihiro's *A Drifting Life*<sup>1</sup>

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Your protagonists are often wide-eyed antiheroes who silently endure grave indignity until one day they explode into acts of extreme violence. This dramatic transformation of the blue-collar everyman seems diametrically opposed to that of, for example, Superman . . . (Nunez 2006, internet)

*A Drifting Life* . . . It's as if someone had taken a Haruki Murakami novel and drawn, beautifully and comprehensively, in its margins. (Garner 2009, internet)

### 1. Why talk about gekiga now?

*Gekiga*<sup>2</sup> was a key word for a new style of manga that emerged in 1959 and became

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2 *Gekiga* is translated in various ways but recently 'dramatic pictures' that connote a 'hard-edged realism characteristic of men's comics' has taken hold. For details see, Timothy Lehmann, *Manga Masters of the Art* (2005: 206, 246).

popular throughout the Japanese graphic art industry in the 1960s. Although some have felt that the term is now largely obsolete, several excellent English translations of the works of avant-garde gekiga artist Tatsumi Yoshihiro have triggered a renewed interest in this 1960s counter-cultural drawing style and led to a reappraisal of his role in contemporary graphic art. In particular, the Japanese publication of Tatsumi's long autobiographical serialization *Gekiga hyōryū* (劇画漂流, hereafter: *A Drifting Life*) initiated renewed interest in the role of the gekiga style in popular cultural discourse. Following this English translation Tatsumi was awarded the grand prize for the manga at the thirteenth annual *Tezuka Osamu bunkashō* (Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize) in 2009. Then *A Drifting Life* received two Eisner Awards in 2010: for the English translation, published by Drawn & Quarterly, in the Best U.S. Edition of International Material—Asia category, and for the Best Reality-Based Work of the year.

Tatsumi Yoshihiro's long story manga<sup>3</sup> *A Drifting Life* was originally published over some eleven years, from 1995 to 2006, in the manga magazine *Mandarake ZENBU*. Its English-language publication in 2009 was a very timely celebration of the appearance in 1959 of the gekiga-style. Anniversaries are significant triggers for commemorative cultural production in Japan, and the year 2009, perhaps coincidentally, also marked two important milestones for Japanese manga: the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the *Gekiga kōbō* (劇画工房, hereafter: Gekiga Atelier) and the twentieth anniversary of the passing in 1989 of the father of modern comics, Tezuka Osamu. However, *A Drifting Life*—Tatsumi's autobiographical magnum opus on the formation of gekiga—is not the only work commemorating that fiftieth anniversary. Matsumoto Masahiko, another member of the Gekiga Atelier, had been working on the long-term project *Gekiga baka-tachi* (The Gekiga Fools), also released in 2009, anthologizing the formation of gekiga. Although this work has not yet been translated into English it was first serialized in *Biggu komikku* (Big Comic) from 1979 to 1984 and predates Tatsumi's work by more than a decade. The resurfacing in contemporary manga culture of the dramatic gekiga style triggered by the international success of the English translations of Tatsumi's stories, along with several *fukkokuban* (reprints)<sup>4</sup> suggests a re-evaluation

<sup>3</sup> I use the nomenclature 'manga' holistically as an umbrella term throughout the text. The term 'long story manga' is used specifically to highlight the contribution of Tezuka's early postwar manga, which significantly extended the content to several hundred pages. Tezuka reminisced about the development of this manga style in *Boku wa mang ka* (1999:90-92) and outlines how he was approached by Sakai Shichima for a collaboration that would result in the epoch-making *Shin-Takarajima* (New Treasure Island, 1947).

<sup>4</sup> For example, hardcover editions of the complete reprints of *Machi and Kage* were published by Shōgakukan Creative (小学館クリエイティブ) in 2009. As far as *gekiga* manga from the sixties are concerned *fukkokuban* (reprints) may refer to re-editing and

of its significance in the postwar history of Japanese visual aesthetics.

## 2. The avatar of Hiroshi: Towards a synopsis of *A Drifting Life*

Following the publication in English of several of his short-story collections, Tatsumi published *A Drifting Life* as his graphic novel-memoir.<sup>5</sup> This long graphic work is influential in several ways. First of all it defies definition, eluding categorisation as either graphic novel or manga. In fact, it is a pastiche of both, in addition to autobiography, memoir and, most importantly represents the style of *gekiga*. This unabashed eclecticism has managed to captivate a large international readership and invigorate the recent transcultural discourse on manga in global popular culture. The work is best described as a long story manga that is drawn in Tatsumi's trademark *gekiga* style. *A Drifting Life* was published in English in 2009 by Drawn & Quarterly as an 855-page single volume in soft cover. The renowned Japanese-American alternative comic artist Adrian Tomine has described the work as follows:

In terms of tone and style, this work shares an obvious kinship with the 'alternative' or 'literary' comics that began proliferating in North America in the mid-1980s (and continue to thrive today), yet it predates much of that work by as much as three decades. (Tatsumi 2005: 5)

In fact, Tatsumi's work was discovered in the eighties by Tomine, because the nature of the American alternative comics movement was to distance itself from the mainstream superhero comics genre.<sup>6</sup> In similar fashion, though much earlier, Tatsumi tried to distance himself from the anthropomorphic Disneyesque drawing style of Tezuka Osamu, and therefore his countercultural graphic discourse is historically closer to America's underground comix movement popularized by Robert Crumb or Gilbert Shelton in the late sixties, which were in turn inspired by the hippie counterculture reformatting into, for example, *renkaban* (廉価版, bargain price editions) of a popular series without altering the story line. The term is also used to refer to a previously completed series whose story arc is started afresh by the same author due to lobbying from fans after a hiatus of more than ten years. For example, the cult following of Hoshi Hyūma, the protagonist of the 1960s series *Kyojin no hoshi* (Star of the Giants), has brought about its continuation in 2006.

<sup>5</sup> John Ingulsrud and Kate Allen (2009, 23, 44) for example, equate the term *gekiga* with the English 'graphic novel,' a term popularized by Will Eisner in his short-story collection *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (1978).

<sup>6</sup> A detailed explanation of American comic culture is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say that the underground comix movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s developed in reaction to stereotypical mainstream comics and various counterculture factors like hippie and punk cultural archetypes, which were disseminated through self-publication and developed into alternative comics in the 1980s.

movement. Be that as it may, Tatsumi's primary influence in the early sixties was American and Japanese film noir and he denies any knowledge of American comic artists of the time. *A Drifting Life* is a hymn to the birth of Japan's hybrid manga culture and through its encyclopedic referencing style of American and Japanese movies as well as graphic art of the period, the work also commemorates a cultural history of manga leading up to Japan's postwar period of high economic growth.

Yet the contemporary significance of *A Drifting Life* lies elsewhere. It marks the reappearance of Katsumi Hiroshi, the countercultural underdog of Tatsumi's stories and his gekiga doppelgänger. In essence, *A Drifting Life* is the prequel to Tatsumi's antisocial heroes of the seventies. It is through Hiroshi, the blue-collar disenfranchised nascent personification of 1960s Japan, that Tatsumi paints his countercultural discourse of the anti-security treaty demonstrations in the 1960s. His gekiga are not like Shirato Sanpei's metaphorical ninja warriors that symbolize class inequality and disenfranchisement. Tatsumi's characters are mundane and often grotesque individuals that make up the lowest level of industrial pre-bubble Japanese metropolitan society. From steel to sewage workers they are the anti-heroes with no hope of happy endings or any prospect of redemption.

Japan in the 1960s was undergoing rapid social transformations, which led to a period of high economic growth, where the rights of the individual were neglected for the greater good of the nation's economy. In the introductory quote at the start of this paper, Tatsumi talks to Irma Nunez from the *Japan Times* about the relevance of his archetypal anti-hero Hiroshi as depicted in his vintage 2009 gekiga style where Hiroshi prowls the streets of Tokyo. Hiroshi, in fact, is Tatsumi's literary alter ego, popularized during the economic growth of the seventies.

Through his alter ego, the simple Hiroshi, *A Drifting Life* narrates the early life of Tatsumi, beginning with the emperor's renunciation of divinity in 1945 when Tatsumi was ten years old and finishing with the nationwide demonstrations against the renewal of the security treaty between Japan and the United States in 1960. The work also juxtaposes autobiography with a cultural history of the Shōwa period, in particular the postwar history of comics culture. Tatsumi achieves this by directly referencing and depicting the major cultural achievements of the postwar period in anthological form.

For instance, Tatsumi (2009: 426–427) directly references the first edition of the detective short manga anthology *Kage*, published in April 1956. He also provides several examples from the work including his own short story entitled *Watashi ha mita* (I saw it) and that of his rival Matsumoto Masahiko entitled *Rinjitsu no otoko* (The man

in the next room) and describes in detail the impact it had on his personal drawing style. In this sense, Tatsumi's references are a graphic cultural anthropology of the 1960s in their depiction of the decline of the rental manga industry and Japan's emerging mass-consumer market.

By the end of the fifties it was becoming clear that Japan was moving into an unprecedented period of economic growth. What was to become the *baburu keiki* (バブル景気, Japanese asset price bubble) of the eighties was already well and truly under way in 1959. This was a year of some consequence in Japan as it also marked the first large demonstrations that would engulf the archipelago in the sixties. The bilateral talks on revising the 1952 security pact also began in 1959 and led to Japan signing the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan on 19 January 1960. Not only did Japan strengthen its ties with the U.S. during the Cold War era, it also triggered a series of opposition movements that shook the country. Peter Kelman (2008: 79) for example points out that between May 1959 and June 1960, roughly 16 million people engaged in protests against the renewal of a revised version of the U.S.–Japan security treaty. It is no coincidence that the Gekiga Atelier was formed at a time of increasing citizen activism. Simon Avenell (2010: 6) discusses the emergence of charismatic philosophies and relates them to what he calls 'movement intellectuals' like Oda Makoto, Tsurumi Yoshiyuki and Tsurumi Shunsuke. Oda Makoto for instance lived as a Fulbright scholar in the United States and was influenced by the Beat Generation before returning via Asia to Japan. His adventures were published in 1961 as the seminal *Nan demo mite yarō* (I Will Look at Anything), which became an instant bestseller that changed the perception of Japan's postwar generation of youth about what was possible in the world. The gekiga style of graphic artists like Tatsumi and Shirato contextualised the philosophies of those 'movement intellectuals' and triggered a period in which public sensibility towards the need for art to become more socially engaging was inaugurated.

From a contemporary perspective, Roland Kelts explains that the world's current infatuation with manga is similar to Japan's assimilation of Walt Disney and Max Fleischer in the early postwar period. The present influx of manga to the Western graphic arts tradition is an example of reverse acculturation made possible because:

Via anime and manga, American teenagers today are experiencing a similar sense of transcultural longing. It may be the result of sheer irrational exoticism, an infatuation with a somewhere else that is consecrated by the quality of the art itself. It may also reflect dissatisfaction with the homegrown product. (Kelts

2006: 211)

Adrian Tomine (2005: 4) also confirmed this disillusionment with the local comics industry when he wrote 'Unlike the garish, full-color, action-packed comic art I'd grown up with, Tatsumi's visuals were restrained, minimal, and stylized in a manner that seemed appealingly foreign.'

Following the demise of his Gekiga Atelier, and in the context of the declining rental-book industry, Tatsumi established his own publishing company, Dai-ichi Puro (第一プロ),<sup>7</sup> while also publishing his gekiga stories in *Garo* (ガロ), a monthly manga anthology magazine founded in 1964 by Nagai Katsuichi. The boom in gekiga mainly occurred in *Garo*, which led Tatsumi to publish a detailed account of the movement, entitled *Gekiga daigaku* (劇画大学), in 1968. *Garo*, founded with the help of Shirato Sanpei, specialized in alternative and avant-garde manga. Its name pertains to one of Shirato's gekiga ninja characters and the first serialization published in it was Shirato's ninja drama *Kamui*. With its themes of class struggle and anti-authoritarianism, it became a bestseller with college students who engaged in the social movements of the 1960s. *Garo* took over where the Gekiga Atelier left off and attracted several influential gekiga artists, including Tatsumi Yoshihiro and Tsuge Yoshiharu.

Whereas Tatsumi continued to consolidate his style through his own publishing house throughout the sixties, after his company folded in 1971 he began to focus on short stories that established his anti-hero Hiroshi, who lived on the fringes of industrial metropolitan society. It was in the 1970s that Tatsumi began to focus primarily on the lowest stratum of Japanese society, and he produced gloomy psychological short-story manga, several of which have recently been translated into English as anthologies<sup>8</sup> as well as into French and have established his reputation outside Japan. In recent years Tatsumi has become known abroad as one of the few manga artists who focused on the plight of Japan's disenfranchised metropolitan underclass during Japan's bubble economy.

### 3. Towards a contemporary definition of gekiga

The birth of the gekiga style in 1959 is usually seen as a reaction against Tezuka's style of drawing, which was focused primarily at a readership of children in early postwar manga. Yet, in the late fifties the revolutionary medium of television, with its continuing

<sup>7</sup> Before long the company changed its name *Hiro Shobō* (ヒロ書房) and continued business until 1971.

<sup>8</sup> These include for example, *Abandon the Old in Tokyo* and *The Push Man and Other Stories*. In 1986 he opened his own manga specialty store in Kanda called *Don comikku*.

serial stories which lured readers into watching every week, was also a serious threat to the manga industry. The weekly manga magazines that emerged in the late fifties spawned the influential *Shūkan manga sandē* (Weekly Manga Sunday) and *Shūkan shōnen magajin* (Weekly Shōnen Magazine), both in 1959.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Craig Norris' analysis of visual art culture has suggested, historically it was the *kashihon-ya* (rental book outlets), which began to appear on virtually all major train stations and street corners, that fuelled the development of the gekiga style:

The gekiga (dramatic pictures) style was developed primarily in rental manga. As opposed to the cuter, anthropomorphic characters that filled many children's manga, the gekiga style contained more mature, serious drama, depicted in a more realistic and graphic style that reflected the tastes of its older readers during the 1950s. However, gekiga's major impact lay not in its graphic style, but in its popularity amongst poorly educated young urban workers and, during the 1960s, university student activists, where it became part of the anti-establishment politics of the time. Shirato Sanpei's *Ninja bugeichō* (Secret Martial Arts of the Ninja, 1959–62) was influential in this regard. Many critics saw this story of peasant uprisings as reflective of student and worker anger over current issues such as the Japan-America Security Treaty. (Norris 2009: 242)

Norris' definition accurately captures the social circumstances of the time; however, my own definition of gekiga, in terms of signifying a transcultural phenomenon, proposes that gekiga also combined native Japanese aesthetic traditions with audio and visual styles from television, radio and, especially, American movies.

Importantly, it marked a shift from anthropomorphic analogies to realism, reflecting the current trend of *nikutai bungaku* (literature of the flesh).<sup>10</sup> In literature particularly writers like Sakaguchi Ango (1906–1955) and Tamura Taijirō (1911–1983) described a return from the wartime 'national body' (*kokutai*) to the physicality of everyday existence. In this context gekiga absorbed the subjectivity and focus on the self depicted, in particular, through the individualism of characters in American movies.

In other words, it was in the melting pot of Japan's metropolitan centers, where Japan's renewed industrialization, following the devastation of the Asia–Pacific War, attracted an urban labor force and its accompanying need for entertainment. In this

<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest magazines capitalizing on weekly serialization was *Nakayoshi*, a monthly *shōjo* manga magazine first published by Kōdansha in December 1954; its rival, *Ribon*, was published by Shūeisha in August 1955. The weekly *seinen* manga magazine *Shūkan Manga Taimusu* (Weekly Manga Times) was first published in November 1956.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of this literary trend see, for example, Douglas Slaymaker, *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction*, 2004.

atmosphere, Tatsumi's gekiga style is an example of a popular cultural site where, following Japan's postwar occupation, a process of reverse transculturation took place. Through the assimilation of American film, animation, and television during the postwar occupation period, manga emerged as a hybrid combining aspects of both American and Japanese culture. Gekiga quickly captured the adult market and was absorbed into the holistic blend of the contemporary manga, which first reached America and Europe in the late eighties after being translated for overseas consumption. By the early nineties, the graphic manga style was successfully exported into the Western cultural hemisphere, due to the gradual increase in the overseas popularity of Japanese animation and computer games.

#### 4. Towards a historical origin of the gekiga style

Yet it took some time before the gekiga style of manga could establish itself. In the impoverished early postwar years it was common for people to borrow money from places called *gageki-sha* (画劇社) to produce rental books and *kamishibai* (紙芝居)<sup>11</sup> art. In his ethnographic study of postwar manga, Fujishima Usaka (1990: 17) suggests that the proliferation of companies with the name *gageki*, like Kansai Gageki and Osaka Gageki, may have been the impetus for the creation of the gekiga school of manga. According to Fujishima (1990: 106–8) the turning point for the rental-manga system came in April 1960 when, in competition with television, publishers of children's magazines seized on the publication of written material and changed almost their entire content to pictorial-based manga. Suddenly, within a single magazine, there were five or six installments of different manga series, each of which demanded a large amount of drawn material at a time when manga artists were in short supply. As a result publishers from Tokyo went to Osaka and took many of the leading manga artists with them.

With the gradual decline of the *kamishibai* storytelling tradition, Japanese manga in the 1950s also experienced a shift from the *akahon*<sup>12</sup> media to the different *kashihon* 'rental' manga that polarized the industry. Yamaguchi Masao (1998: 34–5) for example has suggested that *kashihon* became popular following Japan's defeat in the

<sup>11</sup> *Kamishibai*, or literally 'paper drama' is a form of storytelling that originated in Japanese Buddhist temples in the twelfth century. The revival of *kamishibai* can be tied to the global depression of the late 1920s and the depression at the end of the Asia-Pacific War, when it offered a means for unemployed men to earn a small income. See Kata Kōji (2004) for a detailed history of the *kamishibai* tradition in the Shōwa period.

<sup>12</sup> For details see Mark Mac Williams (2008: 12, 28), where *akahon* or 'red books,' after their distinctive red cover, are described as having evolved from newspaper comic strips of the 1930s, but also reflect a much older tradition of contextualizing oral folk and fairy tales for popular consumption.



Asia–Pacific conflict, the lack of paper and the general poverty providing fertile ground for a cheap rental system. It was in this context that the gekiga movement was born. The term was first used by Tatsumi Yoshihiro in the twelfth installment of the monthly short-story magazine *Machi* (街, City) in the story ‘Yūrei taxi’ (幽霊タクシー, Ghost Taxi) published in 1957. It developed into a grass-roots comic artist movement two years later, in 1959, when Tatsumi Yoshihiro and several like-minded graphic artists who worked for the publisher Hinomaru bunko (日の丸文庫) in Osaka founded the Gekiga Atelier. The initial success of this studio brought the kashihon rental manga into vogue and led to more mature adult-oriented content, which increased the consumer base of manga and diversified the media.

This innovative gekiga style emerged from three parallel trends in postwar Japanese manga. The first was represented by Tatsumi and his group of artists who specialised in short-story manga designed for the rental industry, whereas the second was developed by artists like Shirato Sanpei and Mizuki Shigeru, who arose from the kamishibai oral story-telling tradition. The third, and the main current at the time, was represented by Tezuka Osamu and his long story manga inspired by Walt Disney’s animated films. The blending of the first two autochthonous artistic streams of the short story manga and a variety of existing pictorial kamishibai styles were to combine with the stylistics of American expressionist movies to yield the gekiga style of the 1960s.

Trying to set himself apart from Tezuka’s early drawing style aimed at children, Tatsumi conceptualized his new style as an amalgam of American film-noir expressionism and local film tradition. The heyday of American film-noir, from the 1940s to the late 1950s, owed much to the black-and-white visual style developed from German expressionist cinematography. Many of the classic Japanese films of the time were heavily influenced by this and even films like Akira Kurosawa’s classic police detective story *Nora inu* (Stray Dog, 1949) contained many cinematographic and narrative elements of classic American film noir. Tatsumi’s early experiments with suspense stories simply reproduced cinematographic techniques in a frame-by-frame film-noir type manga and culminated in works like *Kuroi fubuki* (Black Blizzard, 1956), one of the first examples of a gekiga type long story manga.

In his analysis of the gekiga style, published in 1968 as *Gekiga daigaku* (Gekiga University), Tatsumi (1968: 14) explains that before the gekiga style came into being Japanese movies were mainly a mixture of horror and thriller inspired by Henri-Georges Clouzot’s 1955 black-and-white French suspense film *Les Diaboliques*. In these psychological thrillers young and beautiful detective heroes with unusual reasoning

powers would solve complex whodunits. Adopting Tezuka's innovative drawing style that depicted psychological landscapes through close-ups as well as the depiction of backgrounds and the use of onomatopoeia, the gekiga artists added elements from the film noir hardboiled school of crime fiction to their repertoire of visually representing the existential crisis of postwar urban culture.

In time this realization of cinematographic effects led to increasingly realistic drawing techniques in manga. Tatsumi's epic *A Drifting Life* gives several examples of films whose psychological impact inspired his introspective drawing style. He mentions, for example, Orson Welles' creepy savagery in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), where harsh lighting and distorted camera angles combined with seedy locations to evoke the postwar exhaustion in Vienna at the start of the Cold War. (Tatsumi 2009: 169) Tatsumi's works adopt the psychological landscape of this film noir expressionism to convey a distinct sense of exhaustion through the urbane sensibility of his gekiga style. Other examples he mentions are First Sergeant Milton Warden's (Burt Lancaster) cold-bloodedness in Fred Zinnemann's *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and the cruelty of Jack Palance in George Stevens' *Shane* (1953).

## **5. The formation of Gekiga Atelier and the significance of the *gekiga manifesto***

Just as Tezuka Osamu had done previously, as of 1959 most artists who worked for Hinomaru bunko in Osaka moved to Tokyo, where they formed their own independent manga studio called Gekiga Atelier and adopted the term gekiga as their aesthetic principal. Amidst increasing consumer affluence yet rising social unrest, it was Tatsumi who proposed the formation of this revolutionary countercultural graphic arts studio. Even though it was a short-lived venture—it was disbanded a year after its inauguration in 1959—Gekiga Atelier united the most talented graphic artists of the time, including Tatsumi Yoshihiro, Saitō Takao, Satō Masaaki, Ishikawa Fumiyasu, Matsumoto Masahiko, Sakurai Shōichi, Yamamori Susumu, and K. Motomitsu. The artists lived together in the Kokubunji area in Tokyo and in 1959 produced a short-story magazine called *Matenrō* (摩天楼, Skyscraper), which became the creative platform for the gekiga style. In addition, Tatsumi drafted his seminal gekiga manifesto,<sup>13</sup> which asserts

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<sup>13</sup> Tatsumi produced his gekiga manifesto as a one-page *gekiga kōbō go-annai* (Guide to the *Gekiga Atelier*) in 1959 and sent it as a postcard to 150 editors, newspapers, publishers, and manga artists, including Tezuka Osamu. The source of my translation is Ban Toshio's reprint in *Tezuka Osamu monogatari* (1992: 284). In her analysis of manga discourse Jacqueline Berndt (2008: 309) has noted that references to Toba Sōjō go back to 1924, when the cartoonist and critic Hosokibara Seiki wrote the first history of manga.

the importance of gekiga as part of the genealogy of manga by making a connection between manga and Toba Sōjō, to whom the mid twelfth-century *Chōjū-giga* (鳥獣戯画, Scrolls of Frolicking Animals) are attributed.

Tatsumi aimed primarily at redefining the audience of manga through depicting the psychological world of the adult. He wrote in his gekiga manifesto that 'the difference between manga and gekiga most certainly lies in artistic technique, but it can also be defined by its target audience.' He defines this target audience as originally 'ranging from middle school to first grade high school students' but admits that the mature art of Shirato Sanpei and Hirata Hiroshi pushed the age group even higher. (Tatsumi 1968: 28-9)

The clinical psychiatrist Fukushima Akira, who specializes in crime, has argued in *Manga to Nihonjin* ([Manga and the Japanese] 1992: 60) that it was primarily through gekiga that the manga media was able to spread to the untapped adult market. It was not until its rapid spread by the early seventies that criticism of gekiga divided into *koteiha* (肯定派, affirmative faction) and *hiteiha* (否定派, negative faction) primarily because the increasing number of adults reading manga was perceived as a regression to childhood drawings rather than adult-oriented literature. In this respect comics have been perceived as hindering the healthy transition into adulthood in Japan. Fukushima also points out that it was only because of the adult-oriented manga provided by the gekiga pioneers that a multitude of adult genres were able to emerge, for instance erotic magazines such as *Ero gekiga* (エロ劇画, Erotic Dramatic Manga), *Kannō gekiga* (官能劇画, Sensual Dramatic Manga), and *Erotopia*, as well as many other erotic genres that shifted the manga industry up the generational ladder well into the adult market. In this way gekiga became an icon for mature graphic content in the sixties and seventies through its combination of adult concerns, like the individuals search for meaning in disenfranchising metropolitan consumer society. The commonality of these motifs found in Western movies as well as Japanese literature provided a stepping stone towards today's international manga culture.

## 6. Transcultural influence of the gekiga school

Once Tatsumi's concept of gekiga became recognised, mainly through opening up the adult readership market in Japan, writers who specialized in other genres also began to draw in the new manga style. For example, Mizuki Shigeru produced *Gekiga Hitler* in 1971<sup>14</sup> and, because of the intense rivalry between them, Tezuka Osamu also began

<sup>14</sup> It was published in *Manga Sunday* (漫画サンデー) as part 2 of the *Kakumeika series* (革命家シリーズ, Revolutionary Series).

drawing in the style, producing such unusual titles as *Dororo* (1967–68)<sup>15</sup> to compete with Mizuki's successful portrayal of Japan's folkloric *yōkai* (ghost) tradition and his adoption of *gekiga*.

From the height of its popularity in the sixties, *gekiga* quickly fell into disrepute in the seventies due to its often grotesque portrayal of the social underclass that existed in Japan's urban centre. His discourse was criticized as violent and as an influence that corrupted Japan's younger generations. In his afterword to *A Drifting Life*, Tatsumi (2009: 408) wrote that 'all of a sudden *gekiga* was associated with corruption and headlines like "The crimes of the *gekiga* generation," appeared in newspapers.' Tatsumi's frustration is reflected in the social movement known as *yūgai komikku sōdō* (有害コミック騒動, harmful comics riots), which sought to ban obscene and indecent comics. In his psychological investigation Fukushima Akira (1992:50) states that the *gekiga* boom in Japan was a reflection of postwar Japan's infantile education system. This infantilism is corroborated by John Dower (1986: 123), who observes that American propaganda utilized the Western perception of Japan's 'collective psychic blockage at an infantile stage of development.' Yet beside these negative portrayals of *gekiga* in the media, the new dramatic style propelled the comics tradition of Japan into one of the most accessible cultural consumer products the world had ever seen.

It is now generally assumed that the original *gekiga* drawing style has been completely subsumed by the umbrella term of modern manga. However, this is a mistaken assumption and I shall argue below that the gritty realistic *gekiga* style verbalized by Tatsumi and developed through social analogy by Shirato Sanpei remains influential in contemporary manga—as is evident by the success of Saitō Takao's *Golgo 13*<sup>16</sup>—as a strong alternative manga discourse against other graphic tropes like *yaoi otaku* fetishization, *lolicon* and the cultural archetype of *kawaii* (aesthetic of cuteness).<sup>17</sup>

It is equally unhelpful to attribute the influence of *gekiga* to Tatsumi and Shirato and dismiss the movement's wholesale absorption into the mainstream manga boom. Quite on the contrary, *gekiga* continued to exist as an independent dark, almost gothic undercurrent within the mainstream manga culture throughout the 1970s, when Koike

<sup>15</sup> In 2008, Vertical Inc. released an English translation of *Dororo* in three volumes, which received the Eisner Award in the Best U.S. Edition of International Material—Japan division in 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Saitō Takao (1936) produced the story of the professional assassin *Golgo 13* from 1969 up until the present day, which arguably makes it the longest running *gekiga* manga in postwar graphic culture.

<sup>17</sup> For detailed explanations of these terms see, for example, Patrick W. Galbraith, 'Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan,' (2009).

Kazuo (小池 一夫)<sup>18</sup> first drew *Kozure ōkami* (*Lone Wolf and Cub*, 1970–76) in parallel with Tezuka's *Black Jack* (1973–83). Both works, but especially the former, quickly became cult classics due to the epic scope, detailed historical accuracy, masterful artwork and nostalgic recollection of the *bushido* ethos. In addition, the realism of *Kozure ōkami* is reflected in the picturesque and detailed depictions of nature and the adoption of famous historical locations in Japan. As *Lone Wolf and Cub* it was initially released in North America by *First Comics* in 1987, with covers designed by the likes of Frank Miller, and as a result became one of the most successful Japanese manga released in the United States.

Even one of its few predecessors—Nakazawa Keiji's *Hadashi no Gen* (*Barefoot Gen*), one of the first English-language translations, produced in 1976 by Project Gen, a volunteer organization—could not rival its success. Arguably Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* also exhibited strong gekiga influences with its pathos, dark topic, and often grotesque visual style, but it lacked the realistic drawing style of the human figure which made *Lone Wolf and Cub* a success in America.

Due in no small part to Frank Miller, the gekiga style spread to the United States, where *Lone Wolf and Cub* received the prestigious Eisner Award in the category of Best U.S. Edition of International Material for 2001. Miller's work in particular is heavily influenced by the gekiga tradition, as reflected, for example, in *Sin City*, released for the first time in black and white in 1991 to emphasize a sense of neo-film noir expressionism, which as discussed above was also one of the main sources of inspiration for Tatsumi. The transcultural connections appear to bring us full circle here to the history of moving images from screen to paper and vice versa. Finally and most recently, in an interview on the BBC the novelist Max Allan Collins acknowledged this influence when he declared that his *Road to Perdition* is 'an unabashed homage' to *Lone Wolf And Cub*.

## 7. Socio-cultural influence of the gekiga style

The appeal of Tatsumi's autobiographical account is that he intersperses his personal story with an accurate and detailed depiction of Japan's postwar period. One example will illustrate the encyclopedic quality of *A Drifting Life*. In the single-page panel below, Tatsumi depicts the impact of the Korean War on his alter ego. In this way, Tatsumi's private life becomes a vital part of the grand history of Shōwa Japanese history, wherein the private seamlessly unfolds alongside the economic and cultural happenstance of

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<sup>18</sup> Similar to Tatsumi's *Gekiga Atelier* in 1959, Kazuo Koike established *Gekiga Sonjuku* (劇画村塾), a cram school for aspiring *gekiga* artists, in 1977. Koike's school was instrumental in moving the *gekiga* style into the twenty-first century.



Fig. 1: *A Drifting Life*, p. 68.

Japan.

Intertextualizing the personal with the historical in an attempt to re-imagine Shōwa history through the artist's personal life is a common trend in Japanese graphic art, another fine example being Mizuki Shigeru's retelling of Shōwa history in *Komikku Shōwa-shi* (A Comic History of Shōwa, 1994), in which he places himself at the center of the story as the countercultural anti-hero soldier. In both cases history is no longer retold through anthropomorphic characters or populated by names and figures, but is told through realistic trickster narrators who place themselves at the locus of history.

Another important factor in Tatsumi's gekiga oeuvre, particularly in the seventies, lies in his introduction of the social dimension to storytelling. No longer was manga discourse defined through an emphasis on action and adventure as a form of pure escapist entertainment, but it now exhibited a social consciousness that reflected the needs of the individual in Japan. Tatsumi's main character, Hiroshi, is located in relation to factual history and his concerns reflect those of society. This marks a thematic move from escapism, fantasy, and fiction to the realm of social concerns and social realism.

I have already mentioned briefly that many graphic artists who drew in the gekiga style belonged to the generation of youths who had experienced the Asia–Pacific War during their childhood. Arguably it is no coincidence that the trauma experienced by many of those artists found expression in a new style of manga that eschewed the depiction of the trivial comic in favor of the social tragicomic. Several of the most renowned gekiga artists were robbed of their youth during the war and belonged to this disenfranchised *yakeato* generation, including Shirato Sanpei, Tatsumi Yoshihiro, Saitō Takao, Kojima Gōseki, and Tsuge Yoshiharu, who are united in their depiction of nihilism via the gekiga style of realistic manga. Most of these artists were just too young to make it into the group of Japanese child soldiers, who actively participated in the war but were old enough to comprehend the devastation around them in the final years of the war. With their own eyes they saw what Oda Makoto referred to as *akachaketa*

*menseki* (赤茶けた面積, the burnt-out vistas) and they knew the war passively on the home front, through large-scale fire bombings, shelters, and school evacuations. Themselves innocent, they were yet traumatized by the psychological effect of war during a time when their psychology was not fully formed. This sets them apart from adult manga artists like Mizuki Shigeru who experienced the war more actively and had significantly different perceptions of it. As a result, gekiga artists have expressed their childhood experiences through a vague sense of nihilism that is common in their representation of Japan's social condition. In essence, gekiga is an extension of the dramatic rendition of childhood trauma and expresses in its most fundamental sense a longing for social equality and democracy.

### 8. *A Drifting Life* and Tezuka Osamu

It is no coincidence that Tatsumi's *A Drifting Life* begins and ends with Tezuka Osamu. The symbiotic relationship between Tezuka, the "God of Comics", and Tatsumi, the "godfather of comics" (Aoki 2009), is vital to the development of modern Japanese graphic art. *A Drifting Life* begins with Tatsumi reading Tezuka's *Lost World* and he leaves no doubt in readers' minds that it was Tezuka who inspired him to draw. After sending in four panel comic strips for publication, Tatsumi is invited by the *Mainichi shinbun* newspaper, which sets up a round-table talk with Tezuka Osamu and several young artists. As Tatsumi's relationship with Tezuka develops, so does his desire to follow in his footsteps.

Tatsumi (2009:831-834) dedicated the epilogue of *A Drifting Life* to the seventh anniversary of Tezuka Osamu's death, which was celebrated on 9 February, 1995. For the final chapter, or epilogue, Tatsumi jumps from the 1960s during the student demonstrations to 1995 in a sudden emotional commemoration of Tezuka. It is unclear why Tatsumi chose to devote the last chapter of his history to the memory of Tezuka, but the graphics and text are somber, dark (Tatsumi shades his own face in a gesture that hides his expression), and emotional. Perhaps it is a personal dedication to his role model, yet the language suggests otherwise. In fact, Tatsumi's expressions suggest a deep sense of awe and *carpe diem* where 'time swallows everyone without distinguishing between the genius and the ordinary.' (Tatsumi, 2009:833) *A Drifting Life* is Tatsumi's attempt to write himself into the graphic history of postwar manga culture, yet it is also a reflection on how Tezuka had defined the Shōwa history of manga in his own right. Through rewriting his own history, Tatsumi sets out to redefine 'the small boat of gekiga amidst the great ocean of Tezuka's works.' (Tatsumi, 2009:832) Therein

also lies his greatest achievement. *A Drifting Life* redefines the postwar history of graphic art in Japan by displacing the centrifugal force of Tezuka's manga oeuvre and foregrounding the eddies and undercurrents tugging and pulling in various directions to yield the diverse discourses that make up today's hybrid manga media. Initially, Tezuka severely criticized the Gekiga Atelier, but in the end even he had to embrace its tenets and adjust his style. Below is a double page from Ban Toshio's manga biography of Tezuka Osamu depicting the impact of Tatsumi's gekiga manifesto and how Tezuka tried to come to terms with the new movement.



Fig. 2: Ban Toshio, *Tezuka Osamu monogatari*, p. 283-284.

(Above left, p. 285, reading from top, right to left):

*Narrator:* Tezuka Osamu was particularly sensitive about the changes of the period and was irritated and worried.

*Tezuka:* Is this gekiga? Is it interesting?

*Assistant:* Yes.

*Tezuka:* What is interesting about it?

*Assistant:* It creates an atmosphere.

*Tezuka:* 'Mmm.' I don't get it. I don't understand letters drawn by magic.

*Assistant:* Sensei, are you alright?

*Tezuka:* 'Mmm.' The more I think about it, the less I am drawing.

*Tezuka:* Even if I explain it, you won't understand.

*Narrator:* Tezuka Osamu said that this period was the most difficult.

*Narrator:* Perhaps it was the pain of giving birth to a new kind of creative work.

Yet, by the mid-1960s Tezuka could no longer ignore the overwhelming influence



of the gekiga style and its redefinition of adult-oriented manga. The rise of the Gekiga Atelier was a difficult period in Tezuka's life. Ban Toshio (1992: 283–5) has remarked that the emergence of rental manga stores specializing in short-story magazines (*tanpenshi*, 短編誌) for adult readers defined by the gekiga manifesto, which appeared in *Matenrō*, was a serious threat to Tezuka's style of drawing. Not only did rival artists like Tsuge Yoshiharu and Mizuki Shigeru work for the booming rental manga industry but Shirato Sanpei's epic manga also contributed to the mercurial twists of manga stylistics and its new adult readership in the early sixties.

In the end, Tezuka responded with several gekiga work of his own style that would consolidate the gekiga adult style in relation to children's manga. Tezuka's *Black Jack*, *MW* (1976–78), and *Adolf ni tsugu* (*Tell Adolf*, 1983–85) are all notable as Tezuka's attempt to beat the gekiga artists, who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, at their own game.

## Conclusion

Quite recently many of the gekiga discussed above, which have been translated into English as well as other languages, have won some of the top prizes in the American (Eisner Awards), European (Angoulême) and Japanese (Tezuka Osamu bunkashō) comics industry. For Tatsumi, the founding father of the gekiga style, 2010 was a particularly successful year as he won two Eisner Awards for the English translation of *A Drifting Life*. Where, then, within the thematic of manga as a means of intercultural crossover and a transcultural phenomenon, can we locate the significance of *A Drifting Life*?

Several recent manga collaborations suggest that in conceptualizing manga as global graphic discourse we should locate Tatsumi's work as a transcultural production that seeks to combine Japan's native comic tradition with stylised film noir expressionism and a sense of verisimilitude that sought the engagement of artists in the social struggle of postwar Japan. For instance, *Japan: As Viewed by 17 Creators* (2006) is a product of the nouvelle manga movement, wherein a group of Franco-Belgian and Japanese cartoonists attempt to combine their respective comics cultures into one hybrid Franco-Japanese coproduction. The work constitutes an anthology evenly divided between European and Japanese creators, wherein each cartoonist presents a short comic set in a different part of Japan. The Europeans have the outsider perspective, while the Japanese pose as insiders. On the other side of the spectrum of transcultural collaboration is *Bat-Manga!: The Secret History of Batman in Japan* (2008). This work

anthologizes a Japanese Shōnen manga adaptation by Kuwata Jirō of the American *Batman* comic book series serialized from April 1966 to May 1967, created during the Batman craze in Japan. Tatsumi Yoshihiro's *A Drifting Life* lies in between these two divergent attempts towards, firstly, the exploration of diverse cultural influences and the creation of a hybrid form of manga and, secondly, the intercultural collaboration resulting from these crossovers. *A Drifting Life* is both a hybrid and a collaboration, because it is a cooperation of design and translation into English and also because of the American influence in the text and graphism.

Gekiga changed the emphasis of early postwar manga from making readers laugh to portraying the anger and annoyances of Japan's disenfranchised young generations. Omnibus magazines like *Kage* and *Machi* were able to reach an adult readership through the realistic portrayal of working-class hardship in contemporary society. As a result of this shift in theme and subject matter the readership of manga extended rapidly from children to adults.

Rather than an end to Tatsumi's illustrious career, *A Drifting Life* is on the contrary another beginning, with several of his short stories earmarked for movie productions. Thereby Tatsumi's oeuvre is shortly to enter the pop-culture market along the lines of Tezuka Osamu and Mizuki Shigeru.

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