THE PAST WITHIN US: MEDIA, MEMORY, HISTORY

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In 1986, the year after Claude Lanzmann released his film *Shoah*, a very different form of testimony to the Holocaust appeared. This was the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Spiegelman's *Maus* retells the story of his parents' attempts to escape the closing jaws of genocide in wartime Poland, and their ultimate incarceration in Auschwitz. Though much of the story is told in the words – indeed, in the almost audible voice – of his father, Vladek, the work is also a meditation on Spiegelman's own troubled relationship with his father, and with the ghosts of his mother, who committed suicide in 1968, and of Richieu, the elder brother he never knew, who was poisoned by an aunt during the war to save him from the alternative forms of death which awaited in the concentration camps.

If *Shoah*, with its deliberate avoidance of reconstruction or documentary film, confronts the problem of representing the unrepresentable, *Maus* does so in an even more drastic way. For Spiegelman elects to tell his harrowing and profoundly personal story through a medium normally reserved for fantasy and fun: the medium of the comic book. Moreover, with conscious ironic reference to Mickey
Mouse, he depicts all the protagonists in the story as animals: the Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs and Americans as dogs.

The Comic Book as Testimony:  
Nakazawa Keiji and Art Spiegelman

*Maus* highlights both the power and the problems of the comic book as a medium of historical expression. Unbounded by the codes of realism embodied in photography and film, the comic book can make visible images of the past that would otherwise be lost. No contemporary film of the gas chambers in operation survives, but Spiegelman can produce a detailed visual reconstruction of the chambers as they were in 1944, simultaneously interweaving a technical explanation of how the system worked with the voice of his father recounting the survivor’s testimony: ‘Special prisoners worked here separate, they got better bread, but each few months they also were sent up the chimney. One from them showed me everything how it was’ (Spiegelman 1991, 70).

Similarly, Yamaha Yôsuke’s photographs capture the devastation of Nagasaki after the atomic bomb, but the experience of the atomic explosion close to ground zero is not photographically recorded or even recordable, and efforts to reconstruct it on film confront the difficulty of creating visual meaning from a moment of chaos and blinding light and darkness. Yet works like Nakazawa Keiji’s *Barefoot Gen [Hadashi no Gen]*, and many other comic-book renderings of the atomic blast, have the capacity both to imagine and to rearrange the visual structure of the catastrophic event in a way impossible on film. Nakazawa’s comic presents the bombing of Hiroshima from multiple angles simultaneously – as the ominously familiar mushroom cloud viewed from a distance, as the flash of light and infernal darkness experienced by those on the ground, and as the spectacle observed from the Enola Gay,
whose crew are depicted exulting: ‘We did it! It’s a success! Wow, what a shock wave!’ (Picture 5.1).

_Barefoot Gen_, like _Maus_, is a survivor’s tale, a testimony to events which Nakazawa himself lived through as a six-year-old boy. But Nakazawa, writing his comic-book testimony in the 1970s, adopted a strategy of representation radically different from that chosen by Spiegelman in the 1980s. _Barefoot Gen_ is a simple and relatively conventional, if unusually disturbing, comic-book narrative. The story follows Nakazawa/Gen’s relentless battle to survive in the aftermath of the bombing, which killed all his household apart from his mother and a baby sister born the day the bomb was dropped. As the narrative unfolds, Gen’s ordeal introduces the reader to a range of social issues: poverty and exploitation in post-defeat Japan, the fear and prejudice directed at sufferers of radiation sickness, the particular discrimination faced by Korean survivors of the Hiroshima bombing.

Spiegelman, by contrast, not only fantasizes his account by rendering the characters as animals, but also repeatedly unsettles his readers by breaking up the narrative. _Maus_ operates in two time-frames at once. Events in wartime Poland are retold in the words of Vladek, but are counterpointed by a New York present, where Art Spiegelman coaxes (and sometimes bullies) his father to tell his story, while at the same time engaging in endless quarrels with the cantankerous Vladek over household trivia. The visual style alters subtly as the comic moves from present to past, and the comic-book format is disrupted by the inclusion of photographs, and of a previously published comic strip about the suicide of Spiegelman’s mother, drawn in a totally different style from the rest of text. As Marianne Hirsch puts it, ‘_Maus_ represents the aesthetic of the trauma fragment’, where the survivor struggles to connect disjointed pieces of memory into a ‘testimonial chain’ (Hirsch 1997, 39). Spiegelman never allows the reader to be drawn into the illusions of his own comic for too long. He constantly directs our
attention to the unreality of his representations. Volume 2 of *Maus*, for example, begins with Spiegelman and his wife Françoise (a French convert to Judaism living in the United States) debating whether Françoise should be shown in the comic as a mouse or as some other animal. The irony of the discussion is heightened by the fact that Françoise, even while debating her animal identity in the text, is already being depicted in the graphics as a mouse (Spiegelman 1991, 11; see also Witek 1989, 114).

But although their visual approaches differ so greatly, both Spiegelman and Nakazawa face a common dilemma of representation. The comic book can imagine and reorganize the visible past into unforgettable images, and can carry stories to new readers. Both *Maus* and *Barefoot Gen* were bestsellers, and, though addressed to rather different audiences, both undoubtedly expanded their readers’ imaginative insight into profoundly important historical experiences. *Barefoot Gen* also became the first Japanese comic book to be published in English translation (the translation of comic books being made more difficult by the fact that Japanese and English comic books open from different ends, so that the layout of the pictures in translations has to be rearranged).

Yet the authors faced constant and troubling problems of imagery. *Barefoot Gen*, when it was serialized in the mass-circulation comic magazine *Shōnen Jump* in 1973, was criticized by some as being too grim to be appropriate comic-book reading for the young. In response, Nakazawa admits, he was forced to exclude from his testimony some of the darkest images engraved on his memory: ‘I gave in, and decided to shift to a visual style that was not my original intention. I thought that if people were dissuaded through revulsion from following important developments in the story, then there was no point in writing it, so I drew it in a rather soft style’ (Nakazawa 1994, 213). Ultimately, he expresses disillusionment with the results of his efforts at representation:
When I reread my own work, my flesh crawled with loathing. I fell into a state of thinking “how could I have done it so badly?” And this was so painful that I could not bear it. I immediately hid the magazines in which my work was serialized in a drawer. The plot of Gen kept running through my head, but I spent half a year trying to alter my mood by writing entertainment comics. (Nakazawa 1994, 215.)

The difficulty is not simply the risk of negative reactions to excessively gruesome imagery. It is also that the graphic power of comic-book images – their instantly recognizable, unforgettable quality – means that the pictures themselves bear with them (often unintended) concealed memories: associations with other images that we have seen before. So, for example, seemingly horrendous comic-book depictions of death or injury may lack the capacity to move or shock – may even amuse or titillate – because we semiconsciously associate them with similar pictures which we have become accustomed to seeing in the context of adventure, horror or erotic comics. Conversely, some of Art Spiegelman’s pictures are shocking precisely because they express horror through animal figures which we are more accustomed to see in cute and appealing poses. Yet for Spiegelman, as for Nakazawa, the process of comic-book creation remains troubling. Within the text of the comic itself he engages in repeated dialogues about his unease at the task he has undertaken and about his distress at the public response to his work:

[Interviewer 1, depicted as a human wearing a dog mask] Tell our viewers what message you want them to get from your book.

[Spiegelman, depicted as a human wearing a mouse mask] A message? I dunno … I – I never thought of reducing it to a message, I mean, I wasn’t trying to to CONVINCE anybody of anything. I just wanted –
[Interviewer 2, a human with a cat mask] Your book is being translated into German — Many younger Germans have had it up to HERE with Holocaust stories. These things happened before they were even born. Why should THEY feel guilty?

[Spiegelman] Who am I to say ... But a lot of the corporations that flourished in Nazi Germany are richer than ever. I dunno! Maybe EVERYONE has to feel guilty. EVERYONE! FOREVER! ...

[Interviewer 3, a human who appears to be wearing a human mask] Artie, baby. Check out this licensing deal. You get 50 percent of the profits. We'll make a million. Your Dad would be proud.

[Spiegelman] HUH?

[Interviewer 3] So whaddy*a WANT — a bigger percentage? Hey, we can talk.

[Spiegelman] I want ... ABSOLUTION. No ... No ... I want ... I want my MOMMMY! (Spiegelman 1991, 16.)

The Rise of Sequential Art

The dilemmas faced by Nakazawa and Spiegelman highlight both the importance and the complexity of the comic book as a medium of historical expression. Historical comics not only reach a wide audience of people who may read few other history books. Their stark, dramatic images also have the power to burn themselves into our memories, influencing the way in which we see the present and re-remember the past. To understand how the comic book shapes our identification with and interpretation of history, then, it is important to consider the evolution of comic-book imagery. It is also necessary to think about the political economy of the comic book: the way that comics are produced
and circulated, and how the production and ownership of their images influences the readers’ power to interpret, to criticize and to imagine alternative accounts of the past.

The imagery of modern strip-cartoons and comic books – that genre that cartoonist Will Eisner called ‘sequential art’ – owes its shape to a wide variety of influences. An important source of inspiration for early European and North American comic strips was the German tradition of woodblock-illustrated children’s tales, such as Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Struwwelpeter* (1845), whose grotesque images of horrible punishments inflicted on children for minor pranks gave me nightmares when I read it as a child (Picture 5.2). The influence of works like *Struwwelpeter* and Wilhelm Busch’s *Max und Moritz* (1865) can be clearly seen in the US newspaper comics which began to appear with the start of colour printing in the mass media in the late nineteenth century. A favourite figure in these comics was the mischievous child whose antics reduce the surrounding world to chaos (Blackbeard and Williams 1977).

By the first decade of the twentieth century, US newspaper comic strips were already featuring some of the classic elements of contemporary comic-book design, including speech bubbles. Though a few cartoonists experimented with more adventurous layouts, the typical comic strip was a single page spread with a story told in six or eight rectangular boxes. The weird and wonderful faces and human forms incorporated into newspaper comics also drew inspiration from the conventions of the political cartoon, whose origins go back at least to the seventeenth century, but whose popularity was enhanced by the rise of mass-circulation magazines like the British *Punch* (launched in 1841). Contemporary comics may owe something, too, to the Japanese tradition of woodblock printing, widely believed to be a factor behind the immense popularity and worldwide influence of Japanese comic-book art. They were certainly also influenced by the mid-twentieth-century Japanese *kamishibai* – the travelling ‘theatres’ where stories were
narrated with the help of a series of illustrated cards displayed on a portable screen. Many of the leading pioneers of the postwar Japanese comic book (including Shirato Sanpei, whose work is discussed later) had a background as *kamishibai* artists (Schodt 1983, 62). Though the comic-book genre takes slightly different forms in different countries, the flow of visual influences is international. So early Japanese comic books were influenced by American strip cartoons (such as the 1920s favourite *Bringing up Father*) and by animated characters like Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse, while late twentieth-century comics in the US, Europe and much of Asia are influenced by the graphic innovations developed by the postwar generation of Japanese comic-book artists.

Sequential art, however, also owes much to the techniques developed by propaganda experts and advertising executives in the first half of the twentieth century. The spread of mass markets and the advent of total warfare, together with the emergence of the sciences of psychology and statistical sociology, brought a new sophistication to the use of visual images to communicate messages to wide audiences. The art of commercial advertising had a particularly close link to the rise of the comic book. Not only did artists move back and forth between the worlds of commercial design and comic-book production; the first comic books to be published included works like *Funnies on Parade* and *Skippies Own Book of Comics*, produced in the US in the early 1930s to be distributed free of charge to customers as an advertising gimmick by the manufacturers Proctor and Gamble and Phillips Toothpaste (Wright 2001, 3). The comic book, indeed, was in every way a product of mass society. As Will Eisner recalled of the 1930s: ‘We made comic-book features pretty much the way Ford made cars. I would write and design the characters, somebody else would pencil them in, somebody else would ink, somebody else would letter’ (Wright 2001, 6).

Meanwhile, the First World War and the Russian Revolution, coinciding with the refinement of techniques for high-quality colour
printing, encouraged an upsurge of poster art, whose stark imagery and caricatured faces were combined with simple slogans to convey social or political messages. Thus the rise of comic books derived impetus not just from mass markets and mass production methods, but also from the ideological techniques of mass mobilization. As Bradford Wright points out, the period of the Pacific War saw a boom in the US comic-book industry, and is still referred to by fans as ‘the golden age of comics’ (Wright 2001, 54). Comic-book producers cashed in on patriotic fervour, launching characters like ‘Captain America’, who fought for the nation against an array of grotesquely portrayed German, Japanese and other foes. Cheap, easily distributed and requiring little concentration, comics provided ideal reading matter for military forces at home and abroad.

In the ideological warfare of the mid-twentieth century, the comic book was mobilized in many countries and political contexts. In Franco’s Spain, for example, the government fostered a boom in comics promoting national values and the glories of the Spanish race. Comics on historical themes enjoyed particular popularity. The Middle Ages were used as a metaphorical setting for countless tales of heroism, typically featuring a noble protagonist who fights to restore the true king after power has been seized by a wicked usurper (an unsubtle parable of the Franco regime’s seizure of power from the republican government). Yet historical comics were also popular because, by locating an adventure in a remote period, writers could more freely explore themes which would attract the ire of the censor if discussed in a contemporary setting (Vazquez de Parga 1980, 91–107).

Early comic books focused on humour, fantasy, crime or adventures in exotic locations. By the 1940s, though, a growing number of publishers were beginning to harness the techniques of the comic for the presentation of ‘real-life’ stories (Picture 5.3). This was in part a reaction to criticisms from parents and political lobby groups who
attacked what they saw as the corrupting effect of comics on the minds of children. In the US, for example, *Parents' Magazine* launched a series of wholesome educational comics aimed at countering the escapism and violence of bestsellers like *Batman* and *Captain Marvel*. These included accounts of 'men and women who have made history by their courage, brilliance and perseverance', marketed under the slogan 'Truth is Stranger and a Thousand Times more Thrilling than Fiction'. Unfortunately, as one commentator points out, truth also proved to be 'a thousand times less saleable', and after a brief boom in the early 1940s the venture quickly collapsed (Gifford 1984, 172). A somewhat different destiny awaited Educational Comics launched by US entrepreneur Max Gaines in the mid-1940s. Gaines's series *Picture Stories from American History* (launched in 1945) and *Picture Stories from World History* (launched in 1947) were also commercial failures. However, after Gaines's death in 1947, his son William took over the company, which became known by the abbreviation EC, and turned it into one of America's most successful comic-publishing ventures by shifting from education to satire, fantasy and particularly lurid horror comics. But EC was also to publish some intriguingly iconoclastic representations of great moments in US history, to which I shall return shortly (Gifford 1984, 172; Witek 1989, 135).

Early English-language historical comics tended to be short (often four-to-five-page) accounts of the deeds of some 'real-life hero' whose virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice are supposed to offer a model to their child readers. The style is exemplified by the historical sections in the British *Eagle* and *Girl* comics of the 1950s. Often set against the background of the colonial empire, these typically feature a British hero who brings order to the chaos of Africa or Asia. The local people ('natives') are generally anonymous, and appear in one of two guises: either as loyal subjects expressing humble gratitude for the deeds of the colonial master, or as unruly and rebellious 'savages'. Rereading these
comics, which I read as a primary school child, I am struck not just by their racist ideology but also by their remarkably unimaginative graphic style. The page tends to be neatly divided into rectangular frames. The characters are shown in static poses with idealized faces as unconvincing as the leaden dialogue which fills the speech bubbles. The short format of the comics allowed no space for the development of character or plot, and the comic conveys little except a heavy-handed message about the glories of empire building. The stylistic limitations of the genre may help to explain why I find them less memorable than the romantic or humorous comics which filled other sections of the same magazines.

Escaping from the Frame: Harvey Kurtzman, Shirato Sanpei and Chiba Tetsuya

By the 1950s, however, innovations in content and style were opening up new possibilities for the comic as a medium of historical expression. In the postwar United States, a more adventurous approach, in every sense of the word, to the comic-book representation of history was pioneered by the EC comic magazines Frontline Combat and Two-Fisted Tales, edited by Harvey Kurtzman (later to become editor of Mad magazine). After its unsuccessful efforts at publishing educational comics, EC had by the 1950s become best known for its suspense and horror comics, which were characterized by their ‘beautifully crafted and gleefully perverse transgressions of almost every imaginable cultural taboo, including thematic treatments of incest, bondage and sadomasochism, dismemberment and disembowelment, and family murders of every possible combination’ (Witek 1989, 15). Frontline Combat and Two-Fisted Tales, though somewhat less lurid than the horror comics, were also firmly oriented towards a mass entertainment market, offering their readers what was then called ‘he-man adventure’.
The comics produced by Kurtzman and his team of artists have been praised for their visual inventiveness and rich historical detail. By comparison with the visual techniques being developed simultaneously by Japanese comic artists like Tezuka Osamu, however, their style seems rather static. Frontline Combat and Two-Fisted Tales also stuck with the traditional format of the short comic (individual stories are usually seven to eight pages long) making the extended treatment of historical themes difficult. But within this format the writers developed some inventive approaches to reimagining the great events of past and present.

The publication of Frontline Combat and of earlier editions of Two-Fisted Tales coincided with the Korean War. Indeed, the demise of Frontline Combat in 1954 was advertised by its publishers as follows: 'Frontline Combat ... Killed in Action! Frontline is dead, unhappily killed by the very happy ending of hostilities in Korea' (Two-Fisted Tales 36, January 1954). Both magazines therefore devoted a large amount of space to Korean War stories, but they also included tales of more remote conflicts: Two-Fisted Tales extending its range to the fall of the Roman Empire, the fifteenth-century Battle of Agincourt and the Spanish conquest of the Americas.

In many of these stories, an interesting ambivalence is at work. On the one hand, they are firmly located in the tradition of action comics: their graphics focus on exotic locations, blazing guns and the scowling faces of their he-man protagonists. But at the same time many of the comics reflect the fundamentally anti-war philosophy of their editor. Predictably enough, the comics made maximum use of the popular appeal of war action, and focused mainly on the bravery and suffering of the common US soldier. But within this conventional format, Kurtzman's team endeavoured to tackle some unconventional issues. Memorably, if not entirely persuasively, the comics 'Dying City!' and 'Rubble!' (most unusually for US comics) tell stories of the Korean War.
from the perspective of Korean civilians, just as the comic ‘Atom Bomb!’ tells the story of the bombing of Nagasaki from the perspective of Japanese civilians (Kurtzman et al. 1951a; 1951c; 1953). ‘Atom Bomb!’ is doubly unusual in that it also presents the story from a female perspective: through the eyes of an old woman waiting in vain for her son to return from a prison-of-war camp in Siberia.

Kurtzman’s oblique view of history, indeed, was advertised on the opening page of the first issue of *Two-Fisted Tales*, where the Spanish conquest of the Americas is introduced as a tale of evil Europeans, driven by their lust for gold, inflicting rapine and pillage on indigenous American civilization (Kurtzman et al. 1950; confusingly, the first issue is numbered 18, as the magazine had previously been produced under other names). In the same iconoclastic vein, the Kurtzman version of ‘Custer’s Last Stand’ is a story in which General Custer figures as a brutal, incompetent and unpopular commander, while the real heroes are the victorious ‘Indians’ and the ordinary soldiers who die as result of Custer’s bungling (Kurtzman et al. 1952a).

The short and simple format of these comics means that their historical message often seems heavy-handed. At times, though, the images and words are combined into a more subtle commentary on the events of the past. One of the more interesting examples is the story ‘Saipan!’ (Kurtzman et al. 1952b). The text of this comic, which we are told is a true account told by ‘a vet of World War II’, seems at first to follow the conventional model of war stories. A group of US soldiers is cut off from their comrades. One is wounded, and his buddy, refusing to abandon his comrade, stays by him in a cane field awaiting a ‘banzai attack’ by the Japanese. In the end, the attack fails to materialize, and the trapped soldiers are rescued by their companions. The accompanying pictures, however, tell a second, counterpoint story, unannounced by the text. A local farmer comes out to harvest the fields; seen in the distance as he raises his machete, he is mistaken for a Japanese soldier with a
samurai sword, shot dead by the Americans and left lying in a field as they move on to their next assignment. The point of the comic is made precisely by the fact that the farmer's fate is not once mentioned in the written text or dialogue: the local people, in this story, are the unrecorded and unspoken victims of the great military encounter.

While Kurtzman and his team were venturing beyond the limits of the historical comic as an edifying tale of nationalist heroism, innovations were taking place in Japan which would transform the visual potential of the comic as a medium of communication, not just in Japan itself but internationally. A pioneer of these techniques was Tezuka Osamu, whose *Shin Takarajima* [New Treasure Island, 1947] and later *Tetsuwan Atom* [known in English as *Astroboy*] had an immense influence on comic art in the second half of the twentieth century. A key to this transformation of the comic was the introduction of long stories of several hundred (indeed sometimes several thousand) pages. These allow not just far greater scope for the development of narrative and character, but also the extension of particular scenes across many frames to produce stunning visual effects.

Tezuka is particularly well known for his application of cinematic techniques to the comic. Other comic-book writers in the US and Japan had in fact already begun to use some film-like techniques in their work. In 'Saipan!' for example, the death of the farmer is depicted in a style that resembles the frames of a movie sequence. But it was the length of Tezuka's comics that allowed him to give free rein to these new possibilities (Schodt 1983, 62). His graphics draw the reader's eye into the comic, offering a dramatic range of perspectives on landscapes and human (or humanoid) figures. As he wrote in his memoirs, 'I experimented with close-ups and different angles, and instead of using only one frame for an action scene or climax (as was customary), I made the point of depicting a movement or facial expression with many frames, even many pages' (Schodt 1983, 63).
If length was a characteristic of Tezuka’s comics, it was to become an even more striking feature of the Japanese historical comics of the 1960s and 1970s. Shirato Sanpei’s Ninja bugéicho [Annals of Ninja Martial Arts, first published from 1959 to 1962] ran to seventeen volumes, while Ishinomori Shôtarô’s ‘non-fictional’ Manga Nihon no rekishi [A Comic-Book History of Japan] depicts the story of the Japanese past from the earliest times to the present day in fifty-five volumes totalling more than ten thousand pages.

The longer format allowed writers like Shirato to use the comic book to explore complex historical themes. His Ninja bugéicho, which recreates the struggles of the peasantry in sixteenth-century Japan through the adventures of the mythical ninja Kagemura, is famous for (allegedly) having introduced many of the 1960s generation of Japanese students to the concept of historical materialism (Lie 2001, 71). Shirato’s comics, overflowing with movement, energy and violence, are concerned with philosophical and moral issues as much as with the events of history (Picture 5.4). His repeated return to themes of oppression, alienation and human folly are intended as metaphors for the present, as well as interpretations of the past. Yet, despite their far greater historical complexity, Shirato’s comics embody ambivalences reminiscent of Kurtzman’s Two-Fisted Tales. Shirato, whose work has frequently been criticized for its excessive focus on suffering and death, makes the most of the comic’s potential for graphic depictions of violence simultaneously to appeal to a certain readership, and to convey a critical social message. Like Kurtzman’s comic-book narratives, the epic conflicts of Shirato’s stories often end with scenes reflecting the frailty of human life and the futility of violence – death awaits hero and villain alike; the boundless landscape overwhelms the fragile form of the human individual; the body of the defeated protagonist floats out on the tide into the oblivion of history.

The popularity and visual inventiveness of Japanese comics has allowed them to reach a huge audience and to have a profound effect on
the historical imagination of Japan's postwar generations. While a great deal has been written about the content of Japanese history textbooks, and above all about textbook treatments of Japan's military expansion in Asia, far less has been said about the treatment of history in Japanese comics. Yet comic-book versions of history — whether fictional or non-fictional — have probably shaped popular understandings of history at least as much as any textbook.

The comic's focus on action has meant that its presentations of history have inevitably centred on war, and particularly on the war in Asia and the Pacific. Japanese war comics range from the sternly critical depictions of Japan's aggression in Asia, such as the comic-book version of *Ningen no jōken* (*The Human Condition*, 1971 — a tale of the horrors of war in China which also appeared as a feature film), to escapist adventures of wartime heroism which began to win fans as Japan entered the period of high economic growth in the 1960s (Picture 5.5) (Ishiko 1983, 114 and 178).

A favourite figure in wartime adventure comics is the fighter pilot — a character whose individual daring and association with powerful machines appealed to young male readers. The aerial perspective on the conflict, it may be said, has the added advantage of avoiding confrontation with some of the more uncomfortable historical events taking place on the ground. Yet even the pilot adventures of the 1960s and 1970s often assume a cynical, if not whole critical, view of the war. Chiba Tetsuya’s popular 1963–1965 serial *Shidenkai no Taka* (*The Hawk of the Shidenkai* — *Shidenkai* was a make of wartime fighter plane), for instance, attracted readers with its lovingly detailed drawings of wartime aircraft and its cinematic reconstructions of aerial dogfights. But its hero, *Shidenkai* pilot Taki Shōtarō (depicted in the classically cherubic model of the children's comic-book hero) repeatedly defies the commands of the military machine in his quixotic crusade against the (primarily American) enemy, and his final mission
as a reluctant suicide pilot provides a deeply ironic take on the meaning of the war.

Chiba here offers two conflicting visions of the suicide pilot story. One vision is represented by the hero Taki who, foreseeing Japan’s imminent defeat, has begun to look forward to a peacetime future in which he plans to become a teacher, so that he can instruct children about the futility of war. The other vision is embodied in the hero’s authoritarian commander, who, similarly sensing defeat, volunteers for a suicide mission in the hope of saving at least one Japanese life from US bombing raids. In the final frames, as the hero’s beloved friend Nobuko travels happily towards his base for a long-awaited reunion, Taki takes off on his final mission ‘abandoning his mother, abandoning Nobuko, abandoning his dreams of becoming a teacher, but trying his best to believe the statement that his own death will help to save his native land Japan’ (Chiba 1985, 400).

Images of key events in Japanese history are shaped not just by adventure comics like Chiba’s, but also by a host of educational non-fiction comics. While Max Gaines and others in the US struggled unsuccessfully to market educational comics to a reluctant youthful audience, the comic-book national histories of Ishinomori Shôtarô and others have been long-running bestsellers in Japan. Unlike the mid-century US educational comics, which offered edifying tales of heroic figures in an effort to tempt the young away from the antics of Superman and his associates, ‘non-fiction’ history comics in Japan serve as a more palatable supplement or alternative to school textbooks for a generation weaned on comics and television. Ishinomori’s extended treatments of Japanese history are notable for their meticulously precise drawings, their relatively large amount of text and their inclusion of facts and figures (sometimes even graphs and tables) (Picture 5.6). Ishinomori moves repeatedly backwards and forwards from state to society – scenes of politicians debating key issues of the day are interspersed with images
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5.6 Japanese comic book histories. This image from Ishinomori Shōtarō's 48-volume Manga Nihon no rekishi includes a chart showing the introduction of production control policies, alongside more conventional comic images. Source: Ishinomori Shōtarō, Manga Nihon no Rekishi: Gendai Hen, Vol. 5, Tokyo, Chūō Kōronsha, 1994, p. 97.
of anonymous ‘people in the street’ discussing the issues as they read their newspapers or eat their dinners. This allows him to offer detailed depictions of the landscape, costumes and customs of everyday life, while weaving an image of a national community that moves together through time, sharing in the great events of history (see for example Ishimori 1993–1994).

The Comic Eye

In essence the critique of comics consists of nothing more than: ‘It’s interesting!’ ‘It’s not interesting!’ ‘I love it!’ ‘I hate it!’ Well, perhaps if we think about it we could add some other things: ‘It’s on my wavelength (it suits my feelings)’; ‘It makes me feel good’; ‘It’s cute’; ‘It’s fun’ … In any case, words concerning historical significance or social criticism do not spring to mind, and we don’t tend to think about problems of theme and construction. (Yonezawa 1987, 177–178.)

The successful comic uses the force of graphics to grab hold of the reader’s attention and emotions. This is all the more important because of the speed with which comics are consumed. The average Japanese reader is said to consume comic books at a rate of approximately 3.75 seconds per page (Schodt 1986, 18). At that speed, the comic must transmit its message instantly through integrated packages of words and vivid images.

As a medium for communicating history the most striking characteristic of the comic is this inseparable interconnection of text and picture. Judgments about historical significance may not spring to the mind of the reader. But in the case of comic-book histories, the visual techniques which evoke those spontaneous cries – ‘I love it!’ ‘I hate it!’ – convey lasting messages about our relationship to the past. Photographs communicate historical messages not just by themselves but through
their association with words and other images. In the case of the comic, though, the connection between words and image is far more profound. The text is built into the image, and generates its effects through its physical appearance as well as through the meaning of its words. Our response to the text depends on whether it is printed or written by hand, inserted in bubbles or boxes, inscribed in giant characters or in tiny, delicate script. Images, too, work their influence through their relationship with one another. ‘Much of the action of a comic-book story’, notes Joseph Witek, ‘takes place between the panels, in the gutters, so to speak, which separate the panels’ (Witek 1989, 22).

Photographs create a bridge between the self and the past because our own memories are so often embodied in photos, and historical photographs evoke memories preserved in family albums. Comic books prompt a process of identification in a rather different way. Drawing on the traditions of woodblock print, propaganda and political cartoon, the comic drawing’s stark outlines and exaggerated features imprint themselves on our minds in the way that simple shapes imprint themselves on the mind of an infant. Uesugi Satoshi points out that once you have seen cartoons or caricatures of the face of a famous person, it becomes difficult to see the real face in a photograph or on a television screen without, as it were, superimposing the cartoon image upon it (Uesugi 1997, 15–16). The same thing happens with historical events. A vivid comic-book depiction of, say, a battle scene may permanently influence the way that the mind’s eye recalls the scene any time it is discussed in subsequent encounters with history. The comic book thus evokes our emotions – our sense that ‘I love it!’ ‘I hate it!’ – not only in relation to its own images but also in relation to the events of history, and to the people who took part in those events.

Comic books, like novels, make certain historical landscapes visible while rendering others invisible. As we saw in the case of the EC comics *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*, these landscapes may be spatially
and chronologically remote from the readers – Kutzman’s comics ventured into ancient Rome, mediaeval France and elsewhere. But the comic book, far more than the novel, thrives on the immediate visual impact of dramatic action. So it needs to present its readers not simply with historical landscapes to which they can form some imaginative connection, but also with landscapes that are visually exciting. Hence the appeal of war and exploration as topics for comic-book history. Hence too the enthusiasm in Japanese girls’ comics (such as the works of Ikeda Riyoko) for stories set in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Just as the expansion of British travel to the classical and Renaissance sites of Italy in the early nineteenth century encouraged (and was encouraged by) the creation of novels set in ancient Rome or in fifteenth-century Florence and Venice, so the expansion of Japanese tourism to the capital cities of Europe went hand in hand with the fashion for teenage girls’ comics set in the age of the Ancien Régime, the French Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars. These settings offer scope for swashbuckling action of swordfights and duels, but also for scenes of the glamorous worlds of high-society Paris, Vienna or other European cultural centres, where lovingly depicted languorous young men engage in melodramatic romances in the picturesque surroundings of Versailles or the Tuilleries (see for example Ikeda 1972).

The visual quality of the comic book draws attention to a further crucial aspect of our imaginative landscapes of the past. What matters is not just which places and events we see, but also the angle that we see them from. The techniques of comic-book graphics developed by postwar artists like Tezuka Osamu, Chiba Tetsuya and others paid particular attention to angle of vision. By presenting a scene from a particular angle, the skillful comic-book writer can position the reader so that she or he sees events from a certain perspective: from the viewpoint, say, of a child or a fighter pilot, or (as in the case of Nakazawa Keiji’s depictions of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima) from
several points of view simultaneously. In this way the comic, even more than the museum, the novel or perhaps even the mainstream movie, has the capacity to define the collective ‘we’ of the viewing audience.

The positioning of the reader is especially significant because the comic book, far more than the novel, movie or television programme, directs its messages to specific audiences. The genre has evolved into sub-genres separated by gender, as well as by generation. Though some historical films may appeal more to men than to women (or vice versa), few are specifically produced for a male or a female audience only. Comic books, on the other hand, are typically targeted specifically at girls or boys, men or women, and include sub-divisions addressed to gay men, heterosexual men, lesbian or heterosexual women. The British 1950s comics *Eagle* and *Girl* were defined as being for boys and girls respectively, and their historical sections reflected this. Though both dealt with virtually identical imperial themes, *Eagle* normally offered male heroes in the role of conquerors, explorers and colonial governors, while *Girl* offered female heroes, typically nurses or missionaries narrowly escaping fates worse than death at the hands of rebellious colonials. While the Japanese fighter-pilot comics clearly defined their main readership as male, the comics of writers like Ikeda Riyoko are explicitly addressed to teenage girl audiences. Some artists, like Ishizaka Kei (whose work is discussed later) have indeed used a female perspective to develop comic-book critiques of the glorifications of war.

Studies of erotic comics point out how often they are drawn specifically from the viewpoint of the male gaze (for example, Allison 1996). Though there are obvious exceptions, particularly among the ‘ladies’ comics’ – erotic comics for women – which proliferated in Japan from the 1970s onward, erotic comics are commonly drawn so that the reader sees most of the action from the standpoint of the male protagonist – either literally through his eyes or from a position looking over his shoulder at the woman who is the object of the comic’s fantasy. In this
way the comic clearly (though always implicitly) positions the reader both as male and as sharing with other males, including the protagonist and the author, in the communal consumption of the female body.

Historical comics also possess the power to position their readers on one side or the other of a key experience of the past. Joseph Witek has pointed out how, for example, differing comic-book depictions of the US Civil War construct their scenes so that the readers see events either from the Unionist or the Confederate perspective (Witek 1989, Ch. 1). As we shall see, however, the issue of viewpoint is not just a matter of choosing the side from which the reader will view a particular conflict or controversy. It is also concerns the ability of the comic-book writer to choose a particular line of vision as representing the totality of ‘our side’.

From Gōmanism to Chauvinism:
Kobayashi Yoshinori Goes to War

The problems of the ‘memories’ carried by pictures, the imprinting of images on the mind, and the positioning of readers, are all vividly evident in the controversial historical comic books of Japanese writer Kobayashi Yoshinori. In 1992 Kobayashi, who had made his name as a comic-book writer with anarchic satires of Japan’s exam-crazy education system, launched a series called Gōmanizumu senge [A Declaration of Gōmanism – Gōmanism being the ideology of gōman, which is arrogance or insolence]. Here, Kobayashi appears as the hero of his own comic – the embodiment of gōmanism – gleefully giving the finger to the cherished values of politeness, corporate discipline, social harmony and so forth.

Gōmanizumu senge won many fans for its iconoclastic approach to social issues like safe sex and the influence of erotic comics. Looking back at the start of the series, though, it is already possible to see some of the themes that were to dominate Kobayashi’s later comics on
Historical issues. One is a rather obsessive association of the nation with imperiled male sexual potency. Early issues, for example, repeatedly exhorted Japanese women to choose the ‘domestically produced penis’ as a protection from foreign contaminations such as AIDS (Kobayashi 1993, 22–23 and 26–27). At this stage, Kobayashi appears to be writing with his tongue firmly in his cheek, mocking the pretensions of bureaucratic nationalism and sententious health campaigns. As with many aspects of his comics, however, the theme remained constant while the irony was to fade over time.

As the series unfolded, Kobayashi used Gōmanizumu sengen to focus attacks on a range of social targets including the Aum Supreme Truth religious group, discrimination against the bisabetsu burakumin community, and the official bungling and indifference which led to the use of AIDS-infected blood in transfusions. At this point, Kobayashi’s comic-book persona began to take on ironic overtones of the ‘caped crusader’ of 1930s US comics, fighting for the underdog against power, greed and corruption. After a widely publicized split with the campaign by victims of AIDS-infected blood transfusions, however, he shifted ground from being a leading voice in their campaign to being a vocal critic of his fellow campaigners. He began to present the movement as having been taken over by ideologically motivated activists who were pushing their own agendas. Most revealingly, as he later explained, Kobayashi was discouraged to discover that the pathetic child victims whose cause he had championed ‘gradually turned into adults who became tainted by ideology and began to make statements about “having to change the world”’ (Takeda, Kobayashi and Hashizume 1997, 36). This horror of victims who speak with their own voices, rather than waiting quietly for a benevolent media star to take up their cause, was to become even more sharply evident in his next crusade.

In the course of the 1990s, domestic and international attention began to focus on the wartime experiences of large numbers of women
who had been abducted or tricked into wartime Japanese military institutions – so-called ‘comfort stations’ – where they were held and forced to have sex with soldiers. Although the existence of the ‘comfort stations’ had been no secret, until the 1990s none of the so-called ‘comfort women’ had spoken publicly of their experiences, but from 1988 onward the issue began to be raised by women’s groups in South Korea, and in 1991 Kim Hak-Soon became the first former ‘comfort women’ to give public testimony of her ordeal. In 1994 the Japanese government officially admitted that the military had initiated, and been directly or indirectly responsible for running, the ‘comfort-station’ system. Investigations by the International Commission of Jurists and the UN Commission on Human Rights collected evidence which suggested that thousands of young women from Korea, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Netherlands had been drafted into the ‘comfort stations’, often through force or deceit, and forced to submit to sexual intercourse with soldiers. Testimony recorded by survivors stated that many had had to endure beatings and other forms of extreme physical and mental ill-treatment (Dolgopol and Snehal 1994; UN Commission on Human Rights 1996). It was this testimony which now became the focus of attack by Kobayashi’s comics. During the latter part of the 1990s, Gōmanizumu sengen and Kobayashi’s other publications propounded the view that the ‘comfort women’ were in fact prostitutes who had been amply rewarded for their services, and that the testimony presented by former victims was untrue. Kobayashi meanwhile campaigned energetically against the inclusion of references to the ‘comfort women’ in school history textbooks on the grounds (amongst other things) that they were unsuitable reading material for the young.

The shift from attacking corrupt bureaucrats and discrimination to attacking the ‘comfort women’ was a move that brought Kobayashi into association with the newly formed Japan Society for History Textbook
Reform. This society had been created in 1996 with the avowed aim of opposing the 'masochistic' views of the Japanese past, which it claimed were embodied in existing history texts; but a particularly large part of its efforts was devoted to discrediting the evidence of the 'comfort women' (Fujioka 1996; Japan Society for History Textbook Reform 1999). One of Kobayashi's main contributions to the Society's campaign to rewrite history was his best-selling 1998 special edition of Gômanizumu sengen: Sensôron [On War]. Here Kobayashi goes far beyond attacks on the 'comfort women', depicting Japan's wartime expansion as a 'race war' in which Asians, led by Japan, 'fought and defeated the Whites', only, alas, to fall victim to the overwhelming material might of the United States (Kobayashi 1998, 31–32). In the course of the 381-page comic, Kobayashi treats his readers to glorified accounts of the heroism and dedication of Japanese troops, as well as to gruesome tales of barbarities committed by Japan's enemies, particularly the Chinese. His vision of the war as a racial struggle between Asians and Whites does not deter him from using, amongst other things, stories of the 'Han [Chinese] race's tradition of cannibalism', complete with graphic illustrations of butchered bodies, to suggest that atrocities like the Nanjing Massacre were actually inflicted by Chinese troops on their own civilians (Kobayashi 1998, 134–135). At the same time he instructs the younger Japanese generation (to whom the book is clearly addressed) that 'war is not evil; war is policy', and urges them to ask themselves if they, in the same circumstances, would have been prepared to fight to protect their country from 'the power of US imperialism and Soviet and Chinese communism' (Kobayashi 1998, 33–34).

In the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States, Kobayashi followed this up with a second volume, Sensôron 2 [On War 2], in which he once again presents Japan's wartime role as having been that of victim rather than aggressor in the Asia-Pacific War, while also depicting himself as the victim of unpatriotic attacks from assorted
‘left-wing’ and ‘postmodern’ critics of his earlier volume. He also, interestingly enough, interprets the events of September 11 as the start of a Huntington-style clash of civilizations in which it will be necessary for Japan to find its own non-religious ‘Osama Bin Laden’ who will rekindle Japan’s national spirit to fight the identity wars of the twenty-first century (Kobayashi 2001, 9–31).

Kobayashi has also pursued related themes in Taiwanron [On Taiwan], in which he applies his idiosyncratic view of the East Asian past and present to contemporary China–Taiwan relations. Taiwanron’s comic-book portrayal of Japan’s colonization of Taiwan propounds the theory that there have been three historical models of colonization practised by great powers, ‘the plunder model’, practised by the Spanish in South America, the “exploitation model”, practised by Britain etc. in India … and the “investment model” practised by Japan in Taiwan and Korea’ (Kobayashi 2000, 146). Indeed Taiwan, according to Kobayashi, has not only benefited from the blessings of Japanese colonization, but has preserved intact key elements of ‘the Japanese spirit’ which are now under threat in Japan itself (Kobayashi 2000).

These interpretations of the Japanese and East Asian past have attracted fierce criticism from many Japanese historians and social commentators, who have repeatedly pointed out the numerous mistakes, omissions and distortions of historical fact in Kobayashi’s comics (for example, Miyadai et al. 1999; Higashi Ajia Bunshitetsu Nettowâku 2001). But the criticism itself highlights fundamental dilemmas of debating history through the medium of the comic book. Written critiques of Kobayashi’s texts expressed in academic essays and magazine articles, however valid their arguments, seem to have only a rather limited power to reduce the impact of the comics on the imagination of readers. As social commentator Ōta Masakuni points out, it is important not just to examine the text of Kobayashi’s comics but also, as for example critic Uesugi Satoshi has done, to consider how
the visual layout of the comics works its effects (Ôta 2000; Uesugi 1997; Uesugi 2000). Looking closely at the combination of words and images in Kobayashi's comics sheds light both on the considerable influence of these comics in contemporary Japan, and on wider issues of the power of contemporary comic art to influence the landscapes of the historical imagination (see http://www.geocities.jp/pastwithin).

One obstacle to examining these images lies precisely in those visceral reactions — 'I love it!' 'I hate it!' — which the graphic force of comic books evokes. Just as I find it hard to watch Alain Renais's Night and Fog without feeling intense distress, so I find it hard to read Kobayashi's comics — to look at his quasi-pornographic representations of the 'comfort women', his depictions of Chinese cannibalism, or his grotesque images of the Japanese critics whom he labels 'lefties' [sayoku] — without feeling intense revulsion. These images are, after all, designed to produce loathing, and, if (as in my case) that loathing is not directed towards the subjects of the comics, it naturally tends to direct itself towards their creator. As in the case of other emotionally charged media, it is important to acknowledge this feeling, while at the same time trying to understand its source, and to imagine why the same comics prompt very different emotions in others.

Part of the popular appeal of Kobayashi's comics seems to come from the fact that, like Art Spiegelman (though to very different ends) Kobayashi makes use of the power of the comic to operate in two time frames — in past and present — simultaneously. His comics are not simply narratives of the past, but are always also commentaries on the present. Kobayashi's own face stares down on his representations of history, and the graphics depict him doing physical battle with a host of contemporary enemies — scholars and media figures with whose opinions he disagrees. With echoes of the caped-crusader imagery, these foes are typically presented as a massed array of drooling establishment authority figures (a.k.a. 'lefties') with whom our hero engages in single-handed
combat. In the process, the past is always personalized. Interweaving his own biography into everything he writes, Kobayashi turns the great events of history, including Japan’s military expansion in Asia and the Pacific, into metaphors for his personal quest for esteem. This constant counterpoint between past and present, and between national and personal, gives Kobayashi’s renderings of history an immediacy absent from comics which simply relate a story within the self-contained landscape of a past time and place.

Kobayashi’s Gômanizumu senken series is characterized by the slow death of irony. In the earliest episodes, his pronouncements on the social issues of the day are always tongue-in-cheek, but by the time we reach On War, On Taiwan and On War 2 much of the irony seems to have leached out of the comics, exposing the stark outlines of their underlying worldview. This gradual loss of irony is illuminated by a shift in the iconography of Kobayashi’s self-portraiture. In the first volume of Gômanizumu senken, Kobayashi pictures himself consistently as an outrageous comic figure, grimacing and yelling at his audience. The style with which he depicts his own face is almost indistinguishable from the style with which he depicts his critics and enemies. But the further the real Kobayashi advances into a rather flabby middle age, the more his eternally young comic-book alter ego is physically improved and idealized into the classic form of the youthful comic-book hero. By the end of On War, like some inverted portrait of Dorian Gray, the comic-book representation of Kobayashi is not only diverging drastically from its real-life counterpart; it is also becoming more and more sharply differentiated from the stylized representations of Kobayashi’s enemies.

This shift in self-representation is part of a wider change in style which is central to Kobayashi’s representation of history, and is important more generally to understanding the ideological potential of the comic book. The early Gômanizumu comics are drawn in energetic and crowded style, with heavily caricatured human faces and bodies
dominating the page. But as time goes on the style becomes increasingly eclectic. Grotesque cartoon figures increasingly share the page with detailed drawings of buildings, highly realistic photo-like portraits and actual photomontage. Kobayashi also makes growing use of a graphic technique which has become one of his trademarks: the print collage, where a mass of cuttings from newspapers and books, or images designed to look like cuttings from newspapers and books, are jumbled together in apparently random order (though with certain sections enlarged or highlighted) to convey an overall impression of media reportage or academic opinion on a particular issue.

Each of the varied graphic styles comes bearing its own conspicuously imprinted messages. In *On War* and *On Taiwan*, ‘good’ figures are presented in a static, realistic style slightly reminiscent of the graphic conventions of the *Girl* and *Eagle* comics that I read as a child. ‘Bad’ characters, on the other hand (Chinese soldiers and Kobayashi’s Japanese critics, for example), are drawn in grotesquely distorted form with bared teeth and ghoulish blank eyes.

As Uesugi Satoshi points out, Kobayashi’s visual style in *On War* echoes the wartime propaganda techniques used by the Japanese military themselves (Uesugi 2000, 11–12). An even more striking parallel, though, is with the techniques of Soviet poster art. Wartime posters and cartoons, including the comic books of the Second World War and Cold War, have always drawn a sharp distinction between the appealing faces of ‘us’ and the exaggeratedly distorted features of ‘them’ – the enemy. But it was the Soviet poster artists who, in the decades following the 1917 Revolution, realized that this contrast could be intensified by combining radically divergent graphic styles within the same image. Their posters typically portrayed a handsome and muscular Soviet hero, drawn in the conventions of socialist realism, towering over a grotesquely caricatured enemy, depicted according to the conventions of the comic strip (Picture 5.7). A pioneering exponent of this approach
БЕСПОЩАДНО РАЗГРОМИМ И УНИЧТОЖИМ ВРАГА!

ДОГОВОР О НЕНАПАДЕНИИ МЕЖДУ СССР И ГЕРМАНИЕЙ

5.7 Poster by the Kukryniksy Group (1941).
was the artist Viktor Deni, of whose work a contemporary admirer wrote ‘to make an enemy look ridiculous is to half kill him’ (Baburina 1985, 3). Another much favoured technique was the combination of past and present in the same image. Thus, to give just one example, a well-known war poster by the Kukryniksy art group depicts resolute Soviet soldiers in the foreground, while behind them, like guardian spirits, stand the sketched outlines of the heroes of Russian history. The image presents a simple, stark message: the contemporary war machine is the bearer of an ancient and unbroken tradition of self-sacrifice to the nation. Kobayashi adopts an identical visual strategy when he depicts the wartime Japanese suicide pilots watched over by the spirits of the ancient Greek guardians of the polis.

Collage and photomontage were essential elements in the combination of styles refined by Soviet poster art. Cartoon-like drawings were combined with photographic or quasi-photographic images of towering buildings or machinery. Replicas of cuttings from newspapers or party documents were superimposed on one another or combined with cartoon or photographic images. Subtle distinctions of shading or highlighting were used to guide the reader’s eye to key words or phrases in the collages (as in Rodchenko’s well-known poster ‘Peace, Bread, Land’). For Kobayashi, the advantage of the print collage is that it allows him to convey to readers the impression of there being archival source material for his statements, without having to resort to the tedium of actually reading the archives. A characteristic image in the first volume of On War, for instance, offers a jumble of virtually illegible cuttings from newspapers and magazines which purports to demonstrate how, during the postwar occupation period, the media brainwashed the Japanese public into feeling shame at Japan’s wartime deeds. The viewer’s eye is drawn to several highlighted phrases superimposed on the cuttings: ‘the history of the Pacific War’; ‘this is the truth’; ‘the hidden truth is now revealed: know the guilt of the
militarists’. The instantly conveyed message is that the entire content of occupation-period public discourse on the war can be reduced to these words.

Igor Golomstok, tracing the way in which the techniques of Soviet poster art were adopted by both the Nazi and Communist parties in Germany, observes how the images of totalitarian art achieved their effects through constant repetition: symbolic images of the worker’s fist crashing down upon the head of the capitalist, a hand blocking an enemy hand, or the imperialist spider spinning its web of world control ‘moved from poster to poster’, reinforcing simple messages as they went (Picture 5.8) (Golomstok 1990, 173). As Hitler noted in Mein Kampf, ‘Only constant repetition can finally bring success in the matter of instilling ideas into the memory of the crowd. The most important thing ... is to paint your contrasts in black and white’ (quoted in Golomstok 1990, 173). In an age when the power of the state propaganda poster is much diminished, this tradition remains alive in commercial advertising and in mass-marketed comic-book art. Kobayashi’s comics return again and again to the symbolized imagery of the snarling faces of the ‘lefties’, the jabbing fist or accusatory finger of the author, and the outline image of the Japanese nation itself, bound in chains, pierced by spears or menaced by other graphic threats of emasculation.

But by the end of the twentieth century, the comic-book artist was able to draw not simply on the force of the images themselves, but on the memories they evoked of other comic-book imagery. This power is used to particularly powerful effect in Kobayashi’s representations of the ‘comfort women’ issue. As we saw earlier, the visual depiction of exceptionally painful historical events involves the problem of representing the unrepresentable. Portrayals of extreme violence on film or in comics risk rendering the event banal or titillating, particularly when their imagery recalls that of erotica or fantasy entertainment.
Comic-book artists like Art Spiegelman struggle with this problem, extending their graphic imaginations in search of images which express past trauma without voyeurism or trivialization. Kobayashi does the opposite. He deliberately exploits this quality of unrepresentability in his efforts to half kill the former ‘comfort women’ with ridicule. If the weight of historical testimony cuts the ground from under his textual claims that the ‘comfort women’ were prostitutes, he can still draw on the conventions of the pornographic comic book to reshape the past according to his own imaginings. Even if his readers remain unpersuaded
by his text, his sadistic sexual images are likely to remain in their memories, seeping into their own visualizations of the past.

A classic example appears in a 1997 comic where Kobayashi attacks an unnamed book on the history of the ‘comfort women’ issue. As he presents quotations from the text, Kobayashi accompanies these with his visualization of the events described, and, predictably, with an image of himself reading the book. The phrase ‘women treated like draft animals’, for example, is visualized by Kobayashi as group of naked women huddled in a wooden animal-pen, while the words ‘we who were placed in the bestial Hades of sexual imprisonment’ is envisaged in the form a naked woman in the classical pose of S-and-M, kneeling on all fours with her leg chained and her buttocks turned towards the reader, as a group of soldiers ogle at her through iron bars. The quoted text in these scenes is written in a grey and semi-legible font, allowing the words to be overpowered by Kobayashi’s visual fantasies. The same page offers us the spectacle of the expressions on Kobayashi’s face while he reads the book: his eyes pop and his mouth widens from sniggers into guffaws of laughter as he conjures up and hungrily devours his own images of the past (Kobayashi and Takeuchi 1997, 17).

What is striking about this comic is the obvious dissonance between the quoted text and the images. The quotations appear to be from the testimony of former ‘comfort women’ themselves. They speak of the ‘comfort women’ as ‘us’. But in Kobayashi’s comics ‘we’, the readers, are positioned so that we can see events only through the eyes of the male ‘possessor’ of the woman, or, to be more precise, through Kobayashi’s eyes as he fantasizes himself into the position of their male possessor. This is the hallmark of Kobayashi’s depictions of the ‘comfort stations’. In scene after scene, ‘we’ are positioned as a soldier standing in the queue, and looking in through the door at the women within.

This positioning of the reader in relation to the ‘comfort women’, however, is just a part of a much wider positioning of readers in relation
to history as a whole. Like most war comics in Japan, the US and elsewhere, *On War* and *On War 2* repeatedly place the viewer on 'our' side of the confrontation. The consumer of the comics sees events from a location in the line of marching Japanese soldiers, on the deck of the Japanese ship as it prepares to launch an attack on the enemy, or in the cockpit of the kamikaze plane. But Kobayashi also does much more than this. His interweaving of the personal and the national recreates the Japanese perspective in an extraordinary and revealing way.

Both volumes of *On War* offer their readers two parallel narratives: one of the victimization of Japan in the Pacific War and the other of the victimization of Kobayashi himself – a physically weak and bullied child who grows up to be an unappreciated teenager and then a media star assailed by assorted malicious foes. At each stage in this odyssey, the reader is drawn into Kobayashi's fantasies, as he restores his sense of potency by imagining himself into the role of the frontline fighter or kamikaze pilot: a role where his personal travails can be sublimated into trials undertaken on behalf of 'the public = the nation'. So the comic does not simply depict, for example, the heroism of the kamikazes: it depicts a downtrodden Kobayashi conjoring up memories of the heroism of the pilots as a tonic for his wilting virility. Rather than seeing the war through the eyes of the Japanese soldier, the reader in fact sees the war through the eyes of Kobayashi as he *imagines* himself at the controls of the fighter plane or the machine-gun, or in the squadron of departing kamikazes accepting the homage of a line of tearful young women. Meanwhile, the repeated images of the geo-body of the nation at the mercy of enemy weapons are interspersed with images of Kobayashi's own body (or, to be more precise, the slimmed-down Peter Pan version of his body) superimposed on the map of a victimized Japan – standing in the centre of the nation or cradling it lovingly in his arms.

Kobayashi's double story of victimization seems to appeal to some readers because it plays on rather deep-seated anxieties about
contemporary social change. These anxieties emerge from the transformation discussed in Chapter 1 — the force of ‘globalization’, which erodes established political and economic structures — and are reinforced by the emergence of long-suppressed minority histories, which challenge conventional narratives of the national past. Japan is one among many countries where ingrained and intertwined images of gender and national identity are destabilized by contemporary trends. Technological change and shifts in employment patterns accompanying globalization, for example, undermine the certainties which many men felt about their career prospects. The collapse of lifetime employment and age-related seniority systems threatens the status of middle-aged, middle-class men, while at the same time undermining images of Japanese uniqueness. In this context, Kobayashi’s personalized version of the war touches a nerve: it simultaneously constructs both a defensive patrimonial narrative of belonging to the aggrieved nation and a defensive patriarchal narrative of imperilled masculine identity.

But, by rather skillfully combining techniques reminiscent of prewar totalitarian art with the visual and marketing techniques of contemporary pop culture, Kobayashi succeeds in conveying this narrative to a surprisingly wide audience. His comics, while mobilizing readers’ emotional identification with ‘the nation’, at the same time refashion ‘the nation’ in the author’s image. So his readers — many of whom are in fact young, and some of whom are female — are induced by his graphics to identify themselves, not just with Japan, but with a particular Japan as male, middle-aged, and obsessively concerned with the task of reinflating its own imperilled ego.

**Owning the Image**

Works like Kobayashi’s raise important questions about the comic book as a medium for historical debate, and particularly for addressing
traumatic events like the war and the ‘comfort women’ issue. The problem, in other words, is how to counter the totalitarian capacity of some comic-book art to impose particular images of the past – images often laden with semi-conscious memories – on the minds of readers. One approach, of course, is to combat image with image, producing alternative comic-book renderings of the same past.

Totalitarian art was developed in the centralized, authoritarian states of the mid-twentieth century. Although some of its techniques still survive in the comic book, they now operate in the very different context of the contemporary mass-market for pop culture. In this context it is, at least in theory, quite possible to produce a wide range of alternative versions of past and present. As in the case of film, however, so too in the case of the comic book: the nature of the debate is powerfully influenced by the structure and the representational conventions of the media, as well as by those who control them.

Just as Harvey Kurtzman and his team confronted the glorification of events like Custer’s Last Stand with their alternative comic-book depictions, so some writers in Japan have published comic-book counter-narratives to the Kobayashi version of the national past (Picture 5.9). Ishizaka Kei, for example, contests the glorification of the war and attacks on the ‘comfort women’ through comics such as Aru hi ano kioku o koroshi ni [One Day to Kill that Memory, originally published in the magazine Young Jump in 1996 (see Ishizaka 1999)]. This seeks to tell the story from the perspective of the ‘comfort women’ themselves, through the memories of an elderly Korean woman who is driven to the point of suicide in her efforts to seek an apology for the violence she experienced as a ‘comfort woman’ during the war. Here, therefore, the queue of soldiers at the ‘comfort station’ is viewed, not from the perspective of a person standing in the queue, but from the viewpoint of the women within as they face the approaching mob of war-damaged men (Picture 5.10).
Yet, drawing as it does on the conventions of the teenagers’ comic, this depiction of the past also encounters some familiar problems of representing the unrepresentable. In terms of content, the need for a happy ending – or at least for an ending that is not overwhelmingly bleak – threatens to soften the grim realities with which the story deals (just as Nakazawa Keiji found himself forced to soften the story of Hiroshima). In terms of style, the use of comic-book conventions in the
depiction of violence and rape runs up against the problems of the concealed memory of images that we have already encountered earlier in this chapter. The dilemma for the writer, in other words, is not simply how to convey the past realistically, but how to find images to express unimaginable trauma without risking prurience.

The problem of communicative codes is compounded by problems of the control and marketing of the image. Comic books, like many other popular media, operate in a distinctive cultural economy. Though comic-book publishing is less oligopolistic than the world of the Hollywood movie, it has come to be increasingly dominated by relatively large firms working in close association with TV and film production. In Japan by the 1960s, as Frederick Schodt points out, ‘television and comics were firmly intertwined in a symbiotic relationship’ (Schodt 1983, 67). In the US, as intellectual property rights have been reinforced, comic-book publishers have moved in the direction of becoming ‘creative rights companies’, deriving much of their income from licensing their characters to movie makers, computer-game producers and so on (Wright 2001).

This market for characters and images thrives on, amongst other things, what might be called the ‘economics of outrage’. The more extreme and controversial a product, the better it is likely to sell. A relatively careful and literal reconstruction of some historical event (such as the ‘comfort women’ issue) is rather less likely to attract a mass readership than an egregiously one-sided and offensive version. Truth may not always be a thousand times less saleable than fiction, but it is often a good deal less saleable than travesty.

A debate conducted through the comic book, then, demands not simply alternative comic versions of the same event, but also must encourage readers to look critically at the images they are consuming. But here too, the nature of the pop-culture market creates some challenges. The growing power of intellectual property rights can, as Japanese
academic Uesugi Satoshi discovered, limit the opportunity to publish critical examinations of comic-book images of the past. Passages from written texts, provided they do not exceed a certain length, can usually be quoted by critics without the permission of the author (although even this is becoming more difficult in many societies). However, the ownership of images is more tightly policed. When Uesugi reproduced Kobayashi Yoshinori's comic-book images in his writings in order to subject them to critical scrutiny, he found himself on the receiving end of a law-suit for breach of intellectual property (though Kobayashi ultimately lost this court case) (Uesugi 2000, 92–106).

All the same, encouraging the critical consumption of images – whether specifically of Kobayashi's images or of comic-book imagery more generally – is a crucial task. Comic books are a very important medium of historical communication in many parts of the world, and, despite growing competition from electronic media, continue to play a vital role in shaping popular images of the past. The comic also reaches audiences who may seldom read academic history texts or historical novels. A look at the comic book highlights the importance, in a multi-media age, of imagination – particularly visual imagination – as an element in historical understanding. Above all, it highlights the importance of treating the visual imagination of readers as something that needs to be consciously nurtured – extended beyond passive consumerism to active and critical engagement with mass-marketed images. By extending their own visual imaginations, comic-book readers can recognize how the comic positions them in relation to a historical event, and can conjure up their own alternative images of that event as it might appear from other angles. In this way, they can begin to free themselves from the writer's sometimes totalitarian hold on their visualization of the past.

The visual imagination can also be utilized by comic-book writers, and other producers of historical representations to find oblique and
unexpected counter-images capable of depicting traumatic events in the past without prurience or banality. Here the task may not simply be to draw conventional comics which tell the same story from a different point of view, but to think creatively (as Art Spiegelman, Claude Lanzmann, Hara Kazuo and others have done) about the way that unexpected images – or even blanks, gaps and silences – may be used to represent the unrepresentable.

This creative process may also involve moving across the boundaries of the various media of communication, or combining diverse media to tell a particular story. The contemporary range of popular media makes it possible for debates generated in the comic book (like those generated in the movie) to be pursued in other forums, including the emerging forums created by cyberspace. In the next chapter, we shall look at those forums, examine the ways in which their presentations of history intersect with those in comic books, documentaries, feature films and photographs, and consider some possibilities for multimedia approaches to experiencing and understanding history.