Pluto, Astro Boy, and New Historicism
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On August 6 and August 9, 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs onto the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The detonations of these warheads marked the end of World War II, but killed anywhere from 129,000 to 226,000 Japanese people, most of them civilians. Osamu Tezuka was seventeen-years-old at the time and living in Osaka, Japan, a likely target had the United States dropped more atomic bombs on the nation.

In this presentation, we're going to consider the ways history, politics, war, and technology have affected if not determined Tezuka's work and subsequently the work you're reading, *Pluto*. To do this, we'll look at one final critical strategy: New Historicism. By this point you should have already the Purdue OWL page on New Historicism; my main focus here is applying it to Pluto, Astro Boy, and Tezuka's career. This is a brief lecture, with much of the exploration left to you in this lesson plan.

So, what is New Historicism? As we see here, it generally is a way of "interpreting a work through the historical moment in which it was produced." It might be helpful to think of it as biographical criticism, but instead of the author providing meaning, meaning is provided by the historical context in which the work was created. It's also similar to psychoanalytical criticism in that it emphasizes the ways in which authors are not 100% in control of their own work, but rather react and respond to the social forces under which they live. But that doesn't mean authors have no power—and as we'll see, the figure of the "author" still holds a lot of sway.

I like the Purdue OWL's use of this Lois Tyson quote. She frames things this way: "…traditional historians ask, 'What happened?' and 'What does the event tell us about history?' In contrast, new historicists ask, 'How has the event been interpreted?' and 'What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?'" (qtd. in Purdue OWL). The "interpretation" is usually found in cultural artifacts or art works, among other things, and so we look at literature, including comics, as an almost subconscious "interpretation" of its times. This is why New Historicism is sometimes called "Cultural Studies." It's not interested in just "high art," or fine art. Instead, anything is fair game.

You might remember this slide from a Power Point earlier in the semester in which I discussed cultural criticism and comics. Here I was pointing out how contemporary events likely influenced a six-issue run in *The Amazing Spider-Man*—particularly increased anxiety about rogue nations, newly free nations after the collapse of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons, and terrorism. A New Historicism approach would more firmly examine how the creators interpret the events of their own times, making history in their own way alongside the history being made around them.

So one of the tricky but very interesting things about *Pluto* from a New Historicist angle is that it's based on an Osamu Tezuka story. On the one hand, this makes for an easy historical consideration. We can look back at Tezuka's life and work and see how he was shaped by the times in which he lived. [READ WHAT'S ON SCREEN.]

In 1974, Tezuka wrote and drew an autobiographical manga entitled *The Paper Fortress* (*Kami no Toride*) which described his experiences in Osaka during the war, especially a fire-bombing campaign that devastated the city. He would describe that event as follows: "All around me, the ground was a sea of fire … and houses in every direction were burning with leaping flames making a rumbling sound. Then rain with black soot came down. I walked to the top of the riverbank of the Yodogawa. From there, I saw many big craters hollowed by bombs, where numerous objects which resembled human bodies were lying on top of one another. (The bodies were so fractured that they did not look like human beings)" (qtd. in Tanaka).

Tezuka created the initial version of the hero we call "Astro Boy" in 1951. [READ SCREEN.]

Atom was an ambassador for peace, despite his considerable powers, and it's not difficult to see in his boyish frame an innocence and goodness that Tezuka hoped for in the world. This continued to be the case as Atom crossed the Pacific and became popular in the United States thanks to an animated television show. But as Alicia Gibson notes, "Astro Boy must be viewed…as a participant in the cultural processing of the atomic bomb. As a popular icon for both Japan and the United States, Astro Boy functioned from the start as a trans-Pacific cultural object that mediated, or quite literally embodied, Cold War anxieties surrounding the production of new forms of weapons of mass destruction."

That became obvious in the "Greatest Robot on Earth" storyline which ran between 1964-1965, a peak era in the Cold War, when the rapid accumulation of nuclear weaponry by the United States and the Soviet Union threatened to blow the world to smithereens.

As I mentioned in my previous lecture, there's a fascinating, even odd exchange between Atom and Pluto in this comic, one that emphasizes that Pluto is "just following orders," so to speak. Tezuka's work often examined the role of the individual within a much larger political or militaristic system, and indeed, he worried that humans would continue to misuse technology by believing they, like Pluto, were designed to destroy.

So, to review, a New Historicist reading of the original story would likely find parallels between the 7 great robots, Pluto, and not just the atom bombs over Japan but also what was by 1964 a deeply entrenched Cold War. Superpowers. Super weapons.

But that's not what you're reading—well, sort of. *Pluto* was first published in Japan in 2003—fun fact: Astro Boy's "birthday" in the manga was April 7, 2003, which is when Pluto started coming out (as they explain in the backmatter)—and the first volumes (*tankobon*) began appearing in 2004. Now that you've read *Pluto* vol. 2, you may recognize another historical event that influences *Pluto*: the wars in Afghanistan and especially Iraq that began in 2002 and 2003. With its emphasis on hidden weapons of mass destruction—and super-robots as weapons themselves—*Pluto* clearly addresses the manipulations of those in power who seek to profit from war. It also echoes the ways in which war has become more depersonalized, for instance, drone strikes, etc., and how, by assigning the killing work to machines, humans fool themselves into believing in their goodness and innocence.

But as I said before, this is also an adaptation of a famous story by a man called the "god of manga." If you've read the backmatter in both volumes of *Pluto*, you've seen how each is almost obsessed with paying homage to Osamu Tezuka. There is no mention of the Afghanistan or Iraq wars. This actually plays right into the hands of New Historicism, even if that critical strategy famously critiques the importance of the author.

New Historicism grew from many sources but one of them is the work of philosopher Michel Foucault. He would never have called himself a New Historicist, but his study of how knowledge is shaped by power through history is a fundamental tenant of this critical strategy. In an influential essay titled "What Is an Author?" Foucault argues that, aside from the literal person who is the author, there is a kind of second author, a persona, who is culturally important and even limiting. He writes, "The Author is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses: ... The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning." This is not, necessarily, a good thing, says Foucault. I would argue that you can see that fear, or at least a fear of not being deferential enough, in the backmatter in *Pluto*. To not only adapt Osamu Tezuka but to also substantially change the tone and meaning, as Urasawa does in Pluto, is to create *new* meaning.

But that doesn't require the abandonment of the original meaning. In fact, one depends on the other since we live in historical time. To pretend otherwise is what New Historicism says is false. In other words, living now, we must acknowledge that *Pluto* depends on "The Greatest Robot on Earth," and that "The Greatest Robot on Earth" now depends on *Pluto*. And both are reacting to history as well as their own times. So, a true New Historicism approach would have to take into account BOTH of these time periods. It's tempting to read the manga itself as taking a New Historicism approach, i.e., a self-conscious reflection on the changing importance of technology, weaponry, A.I., and power. In the end, it can be read as a dialogue between cartoonists, across time, with changing subjects revolving around the same core concerns.