Pluto: An Overview
Literature of Comics Spring 2020//Robert Loss

Hello, and welcome to the AV lecture for the "Pluto 1 Lesson Plan." This will be a pretty brief look at *Pluto* since I'm relying on some secondary sources and videos to inform you about the history of manga. What I want to do here is establish a few questions and themes to consider as you read the graphic novel.

First, some of the basics. In 1964, Osamu Tezuka, the creator of Astro Boy and the man called "the god of manga," wrote a serialized Astro Boy story called "The Greatest Robot on Earth." In it, a sultan—and yes, there is a problematic nature to that character—creates a massively powerful robot named Pluto who will destroy the other seven most powerful robots, including Astro Boy. Here I should note that in Japan, Astro Boy's name was Atom (or, Atoma), which of course refers to atomic power and nuclear bombs. In "The Greatest Robot on Earth," you know right away that Pluto is the villain, but he's also simply carrying out the orders of his master. He takes no joy in his work, and in a strange moment after Pluto defeats Brando, he asks Astro Boy to essentially save his life…and Astro Boy does. Pluto promises to come for him again in Japan once he's repaired. Astro Boy asks, "But why do you have to fight me?" and Pluto replies, "Because that's what I was designed to do."

I won't tell you everything that happens. I've included a link to the full comic, which is close to 200 pages. But, suffice it to say, "The Greatest Robot on Earth" continued the tradition of Astro Boy being an ambassador for peace and it became one of the most beloved Astro Boy stories of all time.

Fast forward forty years and Naoki Urasawa, known for his manga Monster and 20th Century Boys, decides to honor the fiftieth anniversary of Astro Boy by retelling, reimagining, and updating "The Greatest Robot on Earth." Now, by this point, Osamu Tezuka is revered in Japan, called "the god of manga"—not just the "father," not even the "godfather," but the "god." Born in 1928, Tezuka almost single-handedly modernized the art form of manga with works like Astro Boy, Kimba the White Lion, Princess Knight, and Phoenix among many, many others. There really is no equivalent to his stature in the United States. Not even Walt Disney, who influenced Tezuka, retains the same, singular prestige in the US that Tezuka has in Japan. Nonetheless, Urasawa works out an agreement with Tezuka's estate and begins publishing his adaptation in 2003. He calls it *Pluto*.

Instead of seeing and knowing the backstory of the robot Pluto, in Urasawa's manga the story plays out like a murder mystery. We follow, from the beginning, not Astro Boy but one of the other seven greatest robots, Gesicht, who in Tezuka's story was named "Gerhardt." More than a hundred pages pass before we even meet Astro Boy. And yet, *Pluto* follows the overall plot of "The Greatest Robot on Earth" fairly closely. It was published in serialized fashion, like nearly all manga, from 2003 to 2009 in Shogakukan's Big Comic Original series. These chapters were collected into eight *tankōbon* volumes. What you're reading is the English translation published by Viz Media beginning in 2009, which retains the right-to-left reading format of the original manga.

One of the key themes established right away in Pluto is "What is the difference between humans and robots?" This familiar question takes on added significance as the manga continues, growing into a critique of humanity. It is human violence that sets into motion the events of Pluto. The humans in the book often seem either emotionless or manic while the robots, while understand, do seem to experience emotions. One key scene is when Gesicht must tell the wife of a robot police officer that her husband has been killed. The use of repeated, moment-to-moment panels show ostensibly no outward emotion but suggest, through that repetition, the internal processing of the news and the emotion it causes in this otherwise somewhat cartoonish robot who looks like Rosie from *The Jetsons*. Urasawa uses comics' panel-by-panel language to challenge us.

An even darker theme swirls around the robot Brau 1589, the only robot to date that has killed a human being, violating *the* rule of robot conduct. It's suggested, however, that in order to be more like humans—who kill one another—a robot might achieve "perfection" if it also kills humans. This resonates with the war backstory of the graphic novel, in which all but one of the seven powerful robots participated in the slaughtering of their less-powerful robot kin. This becomes absolutely crucial to the manga's overall plot. However, it's not all so grim. North no. 2, a traumatized super-robot, aspires to be more human by learning to play the piano. Here we return to another common trope: the ability of robots to make art, which is seen as not only creative but unpractical. But it's worth noting that music is, ultimately, mathematical. Time and again, Urasawa suggests that the line between what makes us human and what could make an artificial intelligence human is a very thin line.

What's more, the robots in Pluto question this about themselves, concerned with the authenticity or inauthenticity of their being. Gesicht is having dreams, which may be displaced memories, and the theme of memory itself is important to Volume 1. Brau 1589, in one of the creepiest motifs of the book, keeps offering to trade memory chips with Gesicht and then Atom. Memories seem to be authentic, but we discover that they can be manipulated through technology. The book suggests that, to some extent, we imitate our memories. In other words, I get up, and I remember that I am me, and I act accordingly. However, if we do not question our own memories, we're likely to take for granted their accuracy—a lesson which the composer Sir Duncan learns from North no. 2.

On the surface, Pluto is a compelling, complex mystery, but under that surface it explores fascinating questions about what it means to be human and ethical, with or without technology. I've covered just a few of those questions, and I hope you'll continue exploring them as you read.