

## Prefiguring the Future: Tezuka Osamu's Adult Animation and its Influence on Later Animation in Japan

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines several of the experimental animations among the eight produced from 1962 to 1968 by Tezuka Osamu's Mushi Production. Until today, discussion about Tezuka's animation tends to focus on *Tetsuwan Atomu*, the company's foremost television animation series. Even though Mushi Production failed to become a non-profit company fully involved in exploring the various possibilities of animation that they had originally intended, the company brought out eight interesting experimental animations for non-commercial use. The study of these animations is important because it represents an entirely different image of Mushi Production which has been long ignored, even though it is indispensable for gaining a thorough understanding of their works. The major characteristic found in these works influenced their later animations. *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969), *Cleopatra* (1971), and *Belladonna* (1973), the first feature-length adult oriented theatrical animations in Japan, explored new possibilities in animation that were ahead of their time. The study of these works reveals Tezuka's attempt to establish a directorial identity unusual among the anime productions of the late sixties and early seventies. Most significantly, the adult-oriented approaches employed by Mushi Production in these longer works established a foundation for the later development of the adult animation genre in today's Japanese animation.

This paper examines several of the experimental animations among the eight produced from 1962 to 1968 by Tezuka Osamu's Mushi Production,<sup>1</sup> a group of works that influenced the formation of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969), *Cleopatra* (1971), and *Belladonna* (1973), the first feature-length adult-oriented theatrical animations in Japan. The adult-oriented approaches employed by Mushi Production in those works helped to establish a foundation for the later development of adult genre in Japanese animation. Yet, both the experimental animations and these three adult-oriented animations have long been overlooked, even though Tezuka's attempts to establish a directorial identity were obviously unusual among the animations of the late sixties and early seventies. Even today, those works mentioned above are little known in Japan and elsewhere.

This discussion will focus on the examination of characteristics found in Tezuka's experimental animations that played a key role in shaping the artistic approach and expression of those three feature-length theatrical animations. However, due to the time constraint, detailed analysis will be limited to *Tales of the Street Corner* and *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The former depicts with poetic sentimentality the everyday life of a peaceful street corner represented by major characters such as a male violinist, female pianist and bartender, who inhabit wall posters, a little girl and her teddy bear, a mouse, a street lamp, a playful moth and a plane tree are shown. The narrative is a loose narrative that evolves around the daily life of living things and inanimate objects and how they were affected by war. This is shown by the increasing appearance of a dictator's posters that occupy more and more space on the wall until they take over the whole street corner, and ruin the town in the end. On the other hand, *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a combination of ten omnibus animations; each part was compartmentalized following the inspiration of Modeste Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" suite composed in 1894. Mussorgsky composed the work after visiting the exhibition of his recently deceased friend, the architect and artist, Victor Hartmann. Tezuka followed the original order of the suite, creating ten individuals to represent the different occupations of a critic, an artificial landscape gardener, a plastic surgeon, a factory owner, gangsters, a champion, a television talent, a Zen master,

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<sup>1</sup> These include *Tales of the Street Corner* (1962), *Male* (1962), *Memory* (1964), *Mermaid* (1964), *Cigarettes and Ashes* (1965), *Drops* (1965), *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1966) and *Genesis* (1968).

soldiers, and sculptures. The animation critically interrogates their roles to reveal the unwholesome nature of contemporary society.

Today's presentation ties into my bigger project that aims to re-evaluate the historical importance of Mushi Production's three feature-length animations in the development of modern Japanese animation, as well as to reconsider the controversial and legacies of Tezuka and Mushi Production.

Tezuka established Mushi Production in 1961. His intention was to gather a group of artists to explore various possibilities in animation. Due to economic constraints, however, the company decided to be temporarily involved in projects to raise funds for the company in order to reduce its dependence on Tezuka's income from *manga*. At that time, Hanna Barbara's animation series such as *Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* were being well received on Japanese television, and that stimulated Mushi Production's staff to produce similar programs. In 1963, they adopted Tezuka's most famous long-running *manga*, *Tetsuwan Atomu*<sup>2</sup> (a.k.a. *Astro Boy*) into animation. *Tetsuwan Atomu* was extremely popular and created much income for the company from the spin off merchandising. Mushi Production became the country's pioneer in producing thirty-minute animation series for weekly television programs. These animation series were produced with an exceptionally low number of cels. This technique is usually referred to as limited animation. Movement in limited animation is not so smooth and appears simplified when compared to standard animation produced in Japan. Yet, the feeling of eagerness to see the first locally produced animation series in Japan coupled with the name value derived from Tezuka and his *manga* successfully attracted a huge audience. Later on, Mushi Production became fully engaged in making animation series for television and slowly drifted away from its initial intention to explore the possibility of experimental animation. Until the company declared bankruptcy in 1973, they only managed to bring out eight short experimental animations.

Despite having pioneered animation for television series, Tezuka was denounced for introducing negative influences such as the limited animation technique and comparatively

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<sup>2</sup> *Tetsuwan Atomu* was aired from 1 January 1963 to 31 December 1966, a total of 193 episodes on Fuji Television Network.

complex narrative structure that emphasized the storyline that are still part of the standard pattern for television animation today. Other common criticisms included Mushi Production inauguration of the practice of adaptation, which became the standard in the seventies, when most television animation series tended to adapt famous literature and other established sources that carried name value instead of creating their own original scripts. Regardless that critics and animators from major studios had been upset and critical about Mushi Production and their limited animation techniques, their commercial success immediately motivated other production companies. Toei Animation, the leading production company, who started to produce their feature-length animations in 1958, was inspired by Mushi Production and used similar methods to produce their first animation series for television *Wolf Boy Ken* (a.k.a *Okamishonen Ken*).<sup>3</sup>

Even today, discussion about Tezuka's animation tends to focus on *Tetsuwan Atomu*, the company's foremost television animation series. Even though Mushi Production failed to become a non-profit company fully involved in exploring the various possibilities of animation as had been originally intended, it is also true that the company did bring out eight interesting experimental animations for non-commercial use. Like other independent works, these animated shorts also faced limitations of time and budget, but nonetheless they were free to try any theme, style, and expression that they desired. It is also important to point out that the production of *Tales of the Street Corner* took more than a year, and was wholly funded by Tezuka's income from *manga*. Even though *Pictures at an Exhibition* was produced in 1966 five years after Mushi Production was established, this project was still completely sponsored by Tezuka income. Tezuka's willingness to pour his own resources into these projects illustrates his passion towards experimental animation. Moreover, the study of these animations becomes even more important because it represents an entirely different image of Mushi Production that is indispensable for gaining a thorough understanding of their organization and its influence on later animations.

In an interview a few years after the bankruptcy, Tezuka said that *Tales of the Street Corner* and a few of the early episodes of *Tetsuwan Atomu* were crucial works for Mushi Production. Both works embodied the staff's enthusiasms, and matched the image and spirit of

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<sup>3</sup> *Wolf Boy Ken* was aired from 24 November 1963 to 16 August 1965, a total of 86 episodes on TV Net (now TV Asahi).

Mushi Production that he had intended to establish (Yamazaki, 1978:8). Tezuka's comments revealed the level of importance he placed on these works. The basic principle of the production of *Tales of the Street Corner* was for the staff to be creative and maintain quality while using as few cels as possible in order to cut down on the cost (ibid., 1978:6). In other words, these experimental animations may provide a strong argument for the creative possibilities of limited animation techniques, which have more often been seen as a negative influence from Tezuka. Tezuka's experimental animations also reveal how these simplified forms, symbols, and static formulas were further developed as a means to provide a more mature expression and meaning for his three theatrical animations, *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Cleopatra* and *Belladonna*.

The most significant characteristic found in these animations is that their subjects and styles are situated in-between abstract experimental animation and conventional commercial animation. They employed and mixed distinct characteristics from both genres, revealing a sense of artistic experimentation, yet were still based on responded strongly to various established forms of story-telling. This hybridization shows their intention to view animation as art, as well as an entertainment medium.

Indeed, in an introduction written for 1966 *Pictures at an Exhibition*, there was a statement stressing that there was a lack of animation that catered to the general public beyond the established children and avant-garde (abstract) experimental animations. Accordingly, their *Pictures at an Exhibition* intended to fill this gap by being neither too childish, nor full of obscurities (ibid., 1978:110). They chose Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" suite and tried to visualize the music. What Tezuka intended to do was somewhat similar to Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), an impressive piece that created visual effects illustrating classical music. The design and flow in the beginning sequence of *Fantasia* where Leopold Stokowski conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra in live-action footage, was clearly an effort to make the event look highbrow, and emphasized the adult quality and seriousness of the work. These live-action segments featuring Stokowski, the orchestra, and the host the American composer and music critic, Deems Taylor, were meant to suggest the audience was attending the recognized high culture event of a formal concert. Besides using classical music as an effort to attract an adult audience, Disney also tried to raise the cultural tone and imagined the potential of what an

unusual animation could achieve through style and expression rather than narrative content. The live-action segment found in the beginning of Tezuka's *Pictures at an Exhibition* was meant to serve a similar purpose as Disney's concert format. In fact, according to Tezuka, they were conscious about the orchestra segment in *Fantasia*, and actually shot a similar live-action segment showing the Tokyo Orchestra in the original version. However, it was omitted later when they intended to send the work to the Venice Film Festival (ibid., 1978:7). Eventually the live-action segment was replaced by an animated version of the orchestra, and ends with comical but ironic images of our so-called "heroes of today" heading towards destruction.

The opening sequence and narrative of this animation visualized Mussorgsky's feelings walking from painting to painting while visiting the exhibition. This is shown by a tracking shot employing a subjective view point walking along the side-walk heading towards a western-style building, presumably resembling the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, where Hartmann's exhibition was held. This live-action sequence ends with a zoom-in shot showing the entrance to the building, and then cuts to an animated image showing various paintings hanging on a wall inside the building. Later on, the narrative basically develops from one painting to the other, connect by musical interludes. This arrangement focuses on Mussorgsky's visit to Hartmann's exhibition that stimulated his production of the "Pictures at an Exhibition" suite.

The use of classical music becomes a feature in animation capable of alluring different audience, who are not originally familiar with the works. A detailed analysis regarding references to fine art and art history, an effort to expand the audience through this type of hybridization, will be further discussed below. What I want to point out here is the combination of highbrow classical music with conventional story-telling throughout these omnibus animations. Due to this narrative structure, the flow and rhythm of the animation would not contain many unpredictable surprises. Yet, besides using the narrative to sustain audience interest, each section still raised certain concepts on controversial topics including references to sexual topics, and to highbrow culture and contemporary events which are more commonly found in experimental animation.

In the following paragraph, I would like to demonstrate how Tezuka uniquely developed his opinion about war in four-minute sequence nine that was originally titled “Baba-Yaga.”<sup>4</sup> In the middle of a war, two soldiers from different sides separately run into a little hut on top of a hill, where they find the drawn and haggard face of a woman lying on a bed. Out of sympathy, the first soldier goes out to get the woman some water in order to ease her pain. In the mean time, the second soldier enters the room. He examines the woman, and offers her some water. Not long after, the first soldier returns happily with the bottle fill with water, however he is soon ambushed by the second soldier, the enemy. In the end, their fight eventually leads to their deaths, including the helpless innocent woman.

The most distinctive characteristic of this animation is its visual narrative that moves in a straight forward story-telling manner together with graphic, illustration and torn paper collage. The graphic techniques such as the application of fast-pace flashing of different bright colors, formation of lines and shapes that resemble the operations of war in the opening and ending shots are eye-catching. Meanwhile the ongoing music with a marching tone also helps to strengthen the theme. The encounter of the soldiers and the woman that finally leads to a depressing ending is mostly shown in still illustration, and occasionally a limited amount of animated gestures. The main motion comes from the manipulating of camera movements such as pans, tilts and zooms, as well as the fast-pacing editing technique that helps to create an illusion of movement. Besides the music, there is no dialogue or any other form of explanation added to these still images. Yet, the emotions of the animation are still effectively communicated, despite the lack of fluid movement.

An earlier example *Tales of the Street Corner* dated 1962 also raise the controversial war topic without condemning of any particular party, or sounding like propaganda. Instead, the

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<sup>4</sup> In Russian, “Baba-Yaga” is, in Slavic mythology, the wild old woman, the dark lady, and mistress of magic. She is also seen as a forest spirit, leading hosts of spirits. It is believed that the pictorial basis that became Mussorgsky’s inspiration for “The Hut on Hen’s Legs” in *Pictures at an Exhibition* was Hartmann’s drawing of an elaborately carved clock representing the hut of the Baba-Yaga. Retrieved from <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baba\\_Yaga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baba_Yaga)> 19 October 2006.

depiction centers on how the living beings and inanimate things that exist in a peaceful street corner are affected, and then destroyed by war. For instance, in one scene, an unknown character that is shown wearing army boots forcefully removes the poster with the bartender. Once the poster of the dictator is put on the wall, it immediately kills the cheerful atmosphere. Indeed, the switch means that the dictator not only takes over the bartender's place, but also the bartender's role to be the person in charge. Even though the other posters' characters are not willing to follow and are frustrated, they are too vulnerable and are forced to obey, pained observers to poster of the bartender being slowly blown away, and disappearing from view.

One can easily point out the use of established forms of camera work, composition and editing techniques throughout the whole narrative arrangement. However, the melancholy depiction of the male violinist and female pianist, whose feelings for each other are shown to be extinguished by both of their posters being burnt in the air by due the fires of war, avoids clichéd depiction. The foreseeable tragedy of the moth that was always drawn to a lamp is similar. The drama of the sad little girl picking up her lost teddy bear and walking through the ruins after the war, leads the audience to witness the destruction. This is followed by the camera panning to a few growing sprouts as the little girl disappears at the end of the animation. Until this moment, there is only the sound of the wind accompanying this eye-catching scene. Unfortunately, cheerful music was brought in to accompany the imagery of the new sprouts in the ruins, producing an overly bright ending to the animation. The development of the narrative may seem typical and lead to a convenient solution, yet, the theme contains atypically sophisticated elements that assume the audience possesses the adult experiences necessary to comprehend the meaning while the beautiful imagery and powerful characterization still make for a unique animation for that period.

Another distinct characteristic of these animations are their references to fine art and art history. For instance, the drawing technique and style in Tezuka's *Tales of the Street Corner* seems to be modeled after a style in contemporary oil painting that was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. The treatment of the architectural background mimics the use of a spatula in oil painting, which produces an uneven and rough texture to the colored surface. Street scenes were drawn with angular compositions, also an influence from popular oil painting techniques of the time.

On the other hand, the human and animal figures were presented in flat single color tones, which produced a striking contrast to the background. Although aspects refer to western art, the use of spatulas and angular composition had also become popular in contemporary Japanese oil painting and graphic design.

Tezuka's adoption of these techniques assumed the audience will understand and appreciate them. In other words, Tezuka expected this animation to be viewed by comparatively cultivated audiences with a general art background that could appreciate his work. This high aesthetic level, including excellent graphic design and compositions, shows their intention to create animation catering to adult audiences instead of children, the stereotyped targeted audience for animation.

The last characteristic for discussion is the mixed use of full animation and limited animation techniques. The main characters from Tezuka's first experimental animation, *Tales of the Street Corner* consist of a group of poster figures. As these figures appear on posters, it seems logical not to expect them to move or act like living people. Not only was the company able to cut down on the number of cels, restricting movements to save cost, the limited animation technique seemed an appropriate method to express action within posters. The movements of the figures were generally limited to mechanical and repetitious motions like blinking eyes, clapping hands, tilting heads up and down and so forth. While the movements of other living creatures, such as the mice and moth, were depicted smoothly with an effort to portray realistic motion.

A similar approach is also found in *Critic*, the first segment in the *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The drawing of the critic was done with simple sketching and monotone coloring. Most of the time, the background was presented plain, with occasional still photographs of real scenes. Simple signs or partial drawings were added to suggest the existence of specific locations and situations. The second segment of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *An Artificial Landscape Gardener* tells the very simple story of a tired bee who felt trapped and helpless when he was not able to find anything to ease his hunger and thirst in the artificial garden. Later, this bee, as a living being who clearly does not belong in this artificial garden was thrown out by

the gardener. Yet, this half-dead bee was saved by a dew drops from a wild plant outside the artificial garden.

Both of these segments were presented in limited animation. Even though the background and movement found in the *Critic* were simplified, the whole sequence still looks very interesting with the combined use of live-action photographs and its satire towards critics, who always apply double-standards, and most importantly, know how to speak in a clever fashion. Mushi Production intended to create the satirical content with limited movement. In *An Artificial Landscape Gardener*, the opening sequence contained impressive drawings that give a sense of film noir with angular compositions of the city landscape. Since it is about an artificial garden, the flowers, plants and insects that appear in the garden were all drawn motionless. It is thus natural for the audience to expect very limited movement from the whole sequence. Even though all ten episodes varied in style and content, they generally share one characteristic, the presentation of the stories in an interesting manner without employing fully animated imagery. Tezuka and his staff tried to shape their narrative and character design in a way to legitimately use limited animation techniques.

A noted animation critic, Mori Takuya disagreed with Tezuka's referring to these eight short animations as experimental animations. According to Mori, these works were not unique and just seemed ordinary to him. Moreover, he also regretted that Tezuka was not able to express in animation the themes that he consistently employed in his *manga*. Mori also thought that Tezuka's animations were dull, repetitious, lacking the beauty of movement, and did not achieve the joy of metamorphosis that Tezuka always emphasized in his essays (1989:180-82). Mori raised two issues that are worth discussing in detail. The first concerns the themes used in experimental animation. Fundamental differences between experimental animation and theatrical animation lay in their structure, planning, and audience expectation. For instance, most people go to see experimental animation as a collection of works usually screened at a film festival or an art theatre. Therefore, the author has the potential to do something different from the usual commercial approach which cannot risk alienating the audience. In other words, the main intention for the author is to attract attention from the selection committee and to surprise critics with a unique manner of storytelling that maximizes the potential of animation.

Mori may not have considered Tezuka's animation as experimental because he compared them these works with the avant-garde animations by Kuri Yoji, Manabe Hiroshi, and Yanagihara Ryohei, a group of pioneers of Japanese experimental animation who were active in the early sixties. Their animations engaged issues such as male and female relationships, ironical views of the manners and customs of 1960s Japan, satires on human society and sexual related topics that were considered very daring at that time. In terms of style and expression, they also explored various techniques such as combining animated images with live-action images. On top of that, the experimental use of vocal music, especially by Kuri Yoji, was astonishing.

Naturally, Tezuka's animations look conventional when compared with those works. Yet, his animation should be still considered experimental animation because there were meant for film festivals and independent screening, and were not generally used commercially in theatres. Even though his themes were not as daring as Kuri Yoji and his colleagues, Tezuka and his staff also raised a number of controversial topics, including references to sexual themes, highbrow culture and contemporary events. There was a certain jealousy that caused Tezuka's animations to be neglected due to his fame as a *manga* artist, as well as preconceived ideas of the audience who wished his animation to match their familiar image of Tezuka.

Tezuka was famous for being a big fan of Disney's animation. When *Bambi* (1942) was screened in Tokyo in 1952, Tezuka said that he saw it more than a hundred times in the theatre and roughly thirty times during the revival screening. In the beginning, he paid very close attention to each single movement, the dialogue, the music and so on. When he was familiar with the flow and content of the animation, he started to pay attention to the different reactions of the audience to different scenes (Tezuka, 1977). At the same time, Tezuka also often talked about how the word "animation" related to "living thing," and as movement is a prime characteristic of living beings. Therefore, animation is an art for drawing these movements and animation that does not involve movement can hardly be considered animation. Movement is the major point that differentiates animation from *manga* and painting, and Tezuka emphasized that movement could mean physical motion, growth and metamorphosis (Tezuka, 1980).

Generally, it seems like a reflexive action for the audience, as well as critics, to have expected something more from Tezuka. One reason is that Tezuka talked so much about motion in animation. Secondly, his status as one of the most influential *manga* artists in Japan after the war, he initiated story *manga*, and most significantly had adapted cinematic expressions, such as the point of view, framing, close up, composition and so on to successfully create a stylish look and lively flow in his *manga* which had never been done before. As Takeuchi Osamu has summarized (1998:209-12), the major characteristics that appeared in Tezuka's *manga* were a mixture of different elements that came from several mediums, although mainly from cinema. Tezuka was able to adopt them and add his own touch to it. In short, when Tezuka started to become involved in making animation, everybody was excited to see what he would produce.

Reading Tezuka's statements and watching his experimental animation, it seems like his experimental animations may have been a failure for Tezuka and his staff, who were not able to produce the type of animation they had intended due to economic constraints. Even Tezuka once commented that, he often sighed and closed his eyes when he looked at *Tetsuwan Atomu* at the beginning stage when it hardly has any motion (1977:158). It is also common for Tezuka to openly comment on the poor quality of their later television animation series, critiquing the later works of Mushi Production as having moved into a totally different direction from what he had intended. This created a negative impression of the overall value of Mushi Production's work. Yet, if we put aside these preoccupations and carefully examine these experimental works, we can discover a number of interesting elements that have been overlooked.

It becomes clear that the mixture of different style and approaches found in Mushi Production's *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Cleopatra* have a connection to the approaches used in their earlier experimental animations. In other words, each section of these theatrical animations can be seen as an independent sequence with a unique interesting approach. Tezuka was ambitiously employing those techniques developed earlier in their short experimental animations to give a different look to his theatrical animation. Therefore, there are moments when some of the compositions and approaches employed do not support the development of the storyline, or contribute to the coherence of the overall structure of the film, but were done to satisfy the staff's aesthetic sensibility. These animations reveal an exciting and beautiful visual

form from beginning to end, yet, their episodic structure shows Mushi Production was not ready to take a specific set of new experimental techniques and expand them into a consistent feature-length movie. However, there was a significant change when they produced their third work, *Belladonna*, whose drawing style and coloring method were united and consistent throughout. The coherent style and expression kept the audience focused on the storyline, as well as providing more room for character development.

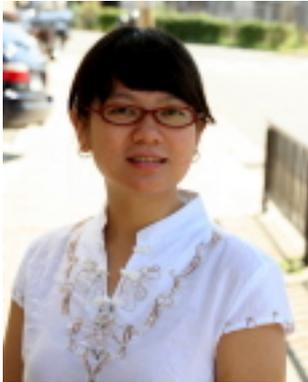
Among the eight experimental animations, there is one work, *Memory* that sarcastically points out stereotypes, and the unreliable memories of human beings. In order to appreciate this work, one really needs to have extended experience of society to share Tezuka's sardonic gags. Sexual imagery and fantasy about women were also employed in a playful manner. This animation provides a glimpse of the later development of the sex and humor combination that was widely used in *One Thousand and One Night* and *Cleopatra*. It is obvious that Tezuka used sex and humor to attract a large audience in his first two theatrical animations. This mixture of lowbrow and highbrow culture was very popular in the 1960s. Indeed, the humor is an important part of the appearance of animations in general. There was no intention to sexually arouse the audience, rather the sexual elements were more of a marketing strategy to draw a broad audience. Therefore, the majority of the sexual scenes do not directly depict sexual activities, and the emphasis is placed on the expression of desire through metaphor, metamorphosis of line and color, and various manipulations of camera and editing technique that are abstract and imaginative. Sexual behavior is conveyed subtly through allusion found in the dialogue, gestures, and personification of objects with suggestive female and male forms. However, when they produced *Belladonna*, humor was almost eliminated, and replaced with a more sexually intense drama employing a historical background that contributed to the serious tone of the animation.

Mushi Production became bankrupt and was not able to produce the adult-oriented, yet less sexual animation that they had aspired to create. However, as Tezuka and Mushi Production achieved their initial dream to become independent and continue to be active in the industry, they successfully prepared the ground for the rapid development of the various types of adult-oriented animation that were to come. In the development of postwar animation in Japan,

there was a growing division between those who viewed the future of animation as focusing on the production of ever more smoothly animated motion and realistic detail, as opposed to those who emphasized aesthetics and the inventiveness of unconventional imagery. The various forms of limited animation employed by Mushi Pro were first done as mere short cuts calculated to save production costs. However, many animators were inspired by their creative freedom, and the exploration of new designs and animation techniques spring up from these beginnings.

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