Copying Atomu

Marc Steinberg

Killing Atomu

Tezuka Osamu, Tetsuwan Atomu. The almost homophonic relationship between the manga creator's name and that of what is arguably his most famous character hints at the closeness of their connection. Like many close relationships it was fraught, full of psychodramas that played out on the pages of the manga, and that Tezuka occasionally discusses in his writings. **Atomu was Tezuka's creation, his child, and a cash cow but also sometimes the albatross around his neck.**[1] Paralleling the creator–creation dynamics found in the backstory of Atomu himself—a robot created by a mad scientist to replace his son, Tobio, tragically killed in a car accident, a robot who failed to grow, disappointed his father-creator, and was subsequently abandoned by him—Tezuka too wanted, at times, to abandon his creation. But unlike the case of Atomu and Doctor Tenma, the difficulty of Atomu for Tezuka wasn't so much a lack of growth but a surfeit of it. Moreover this unhappy growth was not just in size but in popularity and most of all in reproduction. Skipping over all the reasons Tezuka had to love Atomu, let's get to the heart of their relationship by asking the more morbid—and more revealing—question of why Tezuka wanted to kill Atomu.[2] The truth of their relationship and its dynamism will tell us a couple things about the Tezuka–Atomu complex that continues to inform Japanese character merchandising and its national and international cultures of production and consumption.

The desire to kill Atomu arguably boils down to three reasons: (1) fatigue, (2) the overreproduction of Atomu image and its attendant independence from the creator's

hand, and (3) the latter's correlate, the proliferation of bad copies of the character. Fatigue and the proliferation of derivative, Atomu-like TV shows such as Tetsujin 28-gō (1963–66, Gigantor), Eitoman (1963–64, Eightman), and Uchū Ace (1965–66, Space Ace) are some reasons Tezuka offers in his short explanation for his decision to end the TV show with Atomu's spectacular death on December 31, 1966.[3] The concern with the overreproduction of the Atomu image comes out more indirectly in Tezuka's comics, as we will see below, but it is also implied in his account of sponsor Meiji Seika's desire to move onto a new character as the sales of its once explosively popular Atomu-related candies had leveled out.[4] The fatigue is perhaps natural, given that by the time Tezuka first killed the character off semidefinitively in the 1966 television animation episode, "Chikyū saidai no bōken" (The greatest adventure on Earth), the series had already been on air for some 210 weeks, and Tezuka had been drawing the character in comic form since 1951. Putting fatigue aside, then, let's look at the two other elements of the kill-Atomu complex: copies and their circulation, and derivatives and their degradation.

Good Copies

Atomu's reproduction was by no means a problem for Tezuka from the start, or at all times. In fact what made Atomu such a valuable product for his creator was precisely the ways Tezuka exercised control over the circulation of the Atomu image. Tezuka was one of the first artists in Japan to demand companies pay him for the use of the Atomu image, registering this image as a trademark at a time when the makers of toys and other merchandise regularly used character images without seeking the permission of their creators. In this he was quite explicitly following in the footsteps of copyright master Walt Disney.[5] **With the creation of the association of officially licensed Atomu**

product producers, "Atomu no kai" (The Atomu Association), Tezuka and his Mushi Production studio effectively differentiated between good, licensed copies, and bad, unlicensed ones. This also produced the distinction between good licensees and bad pirates.[6]

Yet even amid this economically beneficial situation to Tezuka, wherein Atomu goods were bringing much needed cash to pay for the loss-making animation production business, there was something in the proliferation of Atomu images that would begin to cause Tezuka some trouble: the character gained increasing independence from him. The push toward this independence of the character really came at the beginning of the Tetsuwan Atomu television series in 1963, with the proliferation of character images and merchandise that appeared subsequently. I deal with this event in depth in Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan, but allow me to recall the proliferation of Atomu images in the form of stickers—first as premiums or freebees for Meiji Seika chocolates, and later as a supplement to the Kappa Comics monthly, magazine-size republication of the Atomu manga episodes.[7] The stickers could be affixed to any surface, and thereby create Atomu goods out of anything. Seen as the representative commodity of the Atomu boom, and often seen as the origins of character merchandising in Japan, **the most notable thing about the stickers is the way they encouraged the proliferation of Atomu images throughout the visual space of early 1960s Japan**.

Of particular note here, and on the subject of copying Atomu, is that the sticker images of Atomu were not drawn by Tezuka himself, or his team of assistants. In fact the first Atomu stickers made by Meiji Seika for its Marble Chocolates were drawn by the hand of Meiji marketing department's Ban Shōjirō.[8] In Anime's Media Mix I emphasize the visual homogeneity across media forms. Here it is worth acknowledging

that this visual homogeneity was also marked by a transformation in the line form of Atomu.[9] That is to say, this visual homogeneity was not simply created by the onscreen images matching the original comic but rather involved a transformation of the original comic design itself to be increasingly aligned with the television image of the character. To be sure, Atomu's form had already changed over the course of the 1950s, but, according to some, a much more profound transformation was to occur in the lines of Atomu subsequent to the creation of the television animation series.[10]

Bad Drawings

Eminent manga critic Natsume Fusanosuke is emphatic about this transformation in the Atomu line pre– and post–television anime series. For Natsume and others of his generation who grew up reading the manga during the 1950s, the Atomu drawings of the 1960s anime and stickers are marked by a stylistic transformation that betrayed the original. During the 1950s, Tezuka's characters were marked by lines of force that held them together. These lines had a power that allowed for "the realization of various forms of expression, and the ability to portray the wavering of characters' interior psychology."[11] It was the force of these lines that attracted early fans like Natsume and fueled fans' desire to imitate Tezuka's style by copying his characters.[12] But the dilution of the force of these lines produced a schism, Natsume contends, between earlier Atomu fans and fans who came to the character after the explosion of the manga's popularity post-1963.[13] The anime, stickers, and manga of the 1960s show a rounding of the lines, a smoothness of the image that renders it inorganic, lifeless, formalized, and ultimately "exchangeable"—in stark contrast to the vitality and "absoluteness" of Tezuka's lines in the 1950s.[14] While the beginnings of this transformation were to be

found in the manga around 1961, the process of transformation was greatly accelerated by the production of the anime and its sticker spin-offs.[15] Moreover, the drawing style found in the anime and its character goods quickly led to a transformation of the manga image as well—leading to what Natsume calls a "reverse importation" from anime to manga.[16]

In part this change was motivated by the necessities of animation production and the increased need for drawing characters quickly, for drawing characters capable of movement. The transformation of the lines of Atomu can hence be read as part of the clean-up process of eliminating lines of force that Thomas Lamarre discusses in The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation.[17] But another part of this transformation was the proliferation of images that accompanied Atomu's transformation into a television hero and the object of a mountain of merchandise. As we've already seen, in most cases it was no longer Tezuka who drew or oversaw the drawing of Atomu. There was an increased autonomy of the Atomu drawing process, whereby newer Mushi Productions staff and more and more licensees drew the Atomu image. Attending this process was the increase in bad drawings, such as this one advertising Atomu socks (Figure 1). Here Atomu appears more like Santa Claus with his large belly and boots (or socks?) than the Atomu of the comic or even the anime. No doubt many children bought the socks for what they provided: a likeness of Atomu, more or less. As such they proved that bad copies could substitute good originals, and indeed could transform them through the process of reverse importation, making the distinction between good and bad copies essentially irrelevant. But for disgruntled older fans like Natsume, this remained a bad likeness, a bad drawing.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

Bad Copies

The problem of bad copies (counterfeits, or image use without paying the proper royalties), bad drawings (in anime and its merchandise), and the questions of the whereabouts of the original Atomu all work themselves back into Tezuka's manga on the thematic level. **Tezuka's Tetsuwan Atomu manga serialization shows an increasing concern with the proliferation of the Atomu image from mid-1963 through 1964 with a series of narratives that deal with the doublings of the main character.** In the most representative of these, "Robotto Uchū-tei" (Robot spaceship), serialized in Shōnen magazine during the first major Meiji-Atomu campaign from July to December 1963, Atomu is taken apart and copied piece by piece. These pieces are then reconstructed into an (almost) exact reproduction of Atomu—an act of plagiarism as one scientist complains.[18] Of course copyright infringement is most likely what is being gestured toward here, given Tezuka's and Mushi Pro's pioneering and vigorous efforts to demarcate official Atomu goods from unofficial, pirated ones.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

Yet with springs popping out of Atomu's head, eyes that are too round and stare blankly, and a line perforating his arm from his body, Tezuka is clearly working hard to mark this almost perfect reproduction as nonetheless very different from the original (Figure 2)—at least for the reader (these springs seem invisible to the real Atomu). Indeed, as the scientist who copied Atomu notes, the copy has all the powers of Atomu except his intelligence—"his head is empty,"[19] hence the blank look in the eyes of the

"reproduced Atomu" (fukusei no Atomu) or "fake" Atomu.[20] In the context of a proliferation of Atomu images throughout the lived environment, the distinction between copy and original, primary work and secondary spin-off had already been eroded. **As if to protest against this erasure of original/copy distinction, and to militate against the proliferation of simulacra—simulacra being copies of copies or copies that undermine the very distinction between original and copy—Tezuka works hard in this manga episode to reaffirm the singularity of Atomu, the real impossibility of copying him.** In the final scene of Atomu versus fake Atomu's confrontation, the real Atomu wins out, and the fake Atomu graciously self-destructs (Figure 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE]

Simulacral Rebirth

As we know, though, the logic of the simulacrum is infectious, and the copy won't just graciously twinkle out of existence: the simulacrum acts backward to erase any distinction between real and fake, original and copy. As something positively more than the copy of a copy, the simulacrum, as Gilles Deleuze writes, "harbors a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction."[21] Deleuze notes that the power of the simulacrum lies in its ability to generate a divergence in series, leading to the possibility of "different and divergent stories, as if an absolutely distinct landscape corresponded to each point of view."[22] This power of the simulacrum was latent in the Japanese media ecology in the early 1960s, with the proliferation of bad drawings and fake copies. In fact we should recall that Atomu was himself a (bad)

copy from the very beginning, a mechanical substitute for Doctor Tenma's dead child. Interestingly enough, despite his desire to reaffirm the singularity of Atomu in "Robotto Uchū-tei," Tezuka himself eventually drew on the divergent powers of the simulacrum. Soon after killing Atomu in the television series in December 1966, and as he continued the serialization of Atomu manga in Shōnen magazine, Tezuka began serializing an alternate universe of Atomu in the Sankei Shimbun newspaper: Atomu konjyaku monogatari (Atomu: Tales of times now past). While seeming to rebel against the copies of Atomu by killing his creation, Tezuka later took up the very promise of the multiplicity of copies; following these copies to their logical conclusion, he created different universes, parallel continuities, and narratives in divergent worlds.

Killing Atomu was thus the starting point for another world. In fact, the proliferation of parallel worlds within the Japanese media mix is arguably one of Tezuka's legacies that we may trace to this Tezuka–Atomu complex, and the intensive copying of Atomu that took place around the first animated television series. So ultimately, **if Tezuka wanted to kill Atomu, it was perhaps because the Atomu TV series, its transmedia synergy, and the multiple copies that followed had unleashed the powers of the simulacrum, powers that Tezuka on the one hand wanted to keep in check and on the other hand sought to exploit**. This complex continues to play out in the present day, visible in the tendency of some anime series to emphasize divergent series rather than convergent series, appearing as the parallel worlds, loop narratives, and repetition found in television series such as Yojōhan shinwa taikei (2010, The Tatami Galaxy).[23] But this also has a much more direct manifestation in the numerous rewrites of Atomu since the 1960s, one of the most prominent recent examples being Urasawa Naoki's Pluto. Atomu lives on, in multiple lives and multiple worlds, years after his alleged death.

[bio]

Marc Steinberg is assistant professor of film studies at Concordia University, Montreal. He is the author of Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan (Minnesota, 2011).

[captions]

Figure 1. Example of bad drawing: Tetsuwan Atomu socks, where the character looks more like Santa Claus than the Atomu of the manga. Used by permission of Tezuka Productions Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

Figure 2. Several panels from Tezuka Osamu's mid-1963 through 1964 Tetsuwan Atomu serialization, "Robotto Uchū-tei" (Robot spaceship). Note the use of springs to differentiate this "fake" Atomu copy from the original character. Used by permission of Tezuka Productions Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

Figure 3. A page from Tezuka Osamu's mid-1963 through 1964 Tetsuwan Atomu serialization, "Robotto Uchū-tei" (Robot spaceship), featuring the final confrontation between the real Atomu and the fake reproduction. Used by permission of Tezuka Productions Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

Notes

1. Frederik Schodt discusses the sometimes ambivalent feelings Tezuka had toward Atomu in a chapter aptly entitled "A Complicated Relationship": "Osamu Tezuka killed off Mighty Atom . . . at least three times in his manga series and once in an anime version. It was an act he may have committed out of frustration, for Tezuka sometimes declared Mighty Atom to be his 'worst work.' At the same time Tezuka was intensely proud of his character's success. " Schodt, The Astro Boy Essays: Osamu Tezuka, Mighty Atom, and the Manga/Anime Revolution (Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 2007), 145.

2. Nakaji Hideo remarks on Tezuka's desire to kill Atomu as early as the 1956 killing of Atomu's lookalike brother Cobalt in the "Midoro ga numa" installment. Nakaji reads this destruction of Cobalt as an early manifestation of Tezuka's desire to kill Atomu. Cobalt was subsequently re-created (and indeed this first death was later erased from the episode). See Nakaji, "Tetsuwan Atomu are kore" (This and that on Tetsuwan Atomu), in Manga hihyou taikei: Tezuka Osamu no uchū, ed. Takeuchi Osamu and Murakami Tomohiko (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1989), 177–78.

3. Tezuka Osamu, "Atomu no shi" (The Death of Atomu), in Tezuka Osamu essei-shū #6 (Tezuka Osamu Collected Essays, vol. 6) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1997), 166–68. This essay was first published several months after the end of the Atomu TV series, in the April 1967 issue of Chūō kōron. Schodt discusses this essay in The Astro Boy Essays, 149–50.

4. Ibid., 167.

5. Tezuka Osamu, "Manga no shōhin ka" (The merchandising of comics), in Tezuka Osamu essei-shū #3 (Tezuka Osamu Collected Essays, vol. 3) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1997), 191–94.

6. Tezuka Osamu, Boku wa mangaka (I am a manga artist) (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 1979/2000), 242–43. It is perhaps worth noting the irony here, insofar as Tezuka himself was, as arguably all creators are, a pirate himself, growing as an artist by copying Disney images, as well as those of his other idol Tagawa Suihō.

7. Steinberg, Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 37–85.

8. Tsunashima Ritomo, Atomu shiiru to Tetsujin wappen (Atomu stickers and Tetsujin badges) (Kyoto: Dankôsha, 1998), 29.

9. While I don't discuss the change of line form in Anime's Media Mix, my comments here are meant to compliment my discussion of the homogeneity of the image space there by suggesting how this homogeneity was itself constructed through an encounter across media that effectively shifted the contours of the original Atomu form.

10. Mori Haruji offers a visual chart of Atomu's transformations in the opening pages of his Zusetsu: Tetsuwan Atomu (Illustrated: Tetsuwan Atomu) (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo, 2003), 2–3.

11. Natsume Fusanosuke, Tezuka Osamu wa doko ni iru (Where is Tezuka Osamu?) (Tokyo: Chikuma, 1995), 86.

12. Ibid., 87.

13. Ibid., 137.

14. Ibid., 197.

15. Ibid., 164, 149.

16. Ibid., 148.

17. Thomas Lamarre, The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 70–74.

18. Tezuka Osamu, "Robotto Uchū-tei no maki," in Tetsuwan Atomu, vol. 11 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1980), 164.

19. Ibid., 170.

20. Ibid., 172, 186.

21. Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, trans. Mark Lester, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 262.

22. Ibid., 260.

23. I further develop an analysis of The Tatami Galaxy in terms of media divergence in "Condensing the Media Mix: The Tatami Galaxy's Multiple Possible Worlds," The Canadian Journal of Film Studies (Fall 2012): 71-92.