

SISEA 590 – Special Topics
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Professor Kenneth B. Pyle

S u p e r f l a t !

The
Exploding
Art
of

Takashi Murakami

By,
Brandon Wright

Introduction –
Atomic trauma and postwar pop art in Japan

“*Art is Explosion!*”¹
Geijutsu wa bakuhatsu da!

TARŌ OKAMOTO²

On August 6, 1945 at 8:15 a.m., the power of the atom was unleashed against humanity for the first time in history. Piloted by Paul Tibbets, the U.S. B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped an atomic bomb – dubbed “Little Boy” – on the city of Hiroshima. Those Japanese who experienced the blast referred to it as the *pika-don*. This was a euphemism that described the, “blinding flash and ensuing blast of the atomic bombs.”³ The center of the instantaneous, blinding pulse from the detonation reached nearly 5,400 degrees Fahrenheit; to those who were near the center, it brought instant death as human beings passed from being to nothingness, “faster than any human physiology can register. Among those who died from the bomb, they were the lucky ones and presumably knew nothing.”⁴ The *pika-don* of Little Boy (followed by Fat Man’s own *pika-don* over Nagasaki three days later) was the single most devastating attack in human history. It was a portend of Japan’s momentous surrender and the first “push” in the cascade of falling dominoes that spelt out the end the Pacific War, and with it, the end of the Imperial Japanese Empire.

Given the enormity of the atomic bombs as weapons, how have the visceral feelings of those who experienced the trauma of the *pika-don* been transmitted through the generations to survive in Japanese society to this day? In Japan, the subject of the atomic bombs is relatively taboo in daily conversation, however the traumas of the atomic attacks have been transmitted vicariously for years. The traumas have permeated the Japanese

¹ The catchphrase of the artist, famous for his gigantic *Tower of the Sun* monument at *Expo '70*.

² Murakami, Takashi. (Ed) *Little Boy*. New York: Yale University Press. (2005) pp. 01

³ Dower, John W., “The Bombed”, in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (1996) pp. 128

⁴ Frank, Richard B., *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*. New York: Penguin Group. (1999) pp. 264-265

consciousness to its core and remain an influential force to this day; nowhere is this more visible than in popular art. This can be seen with art in the immediate postwar period.

John Dower notes that the immediate atmosphere of the postwar was one where time was peculiarly warped and that:

...the Japanese did not begin to really *visualize* the human consequences of the bombs in concrete, vivid was until three or four years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been destroyed. The first graphic depictions of victims seen in Japan were not photographs but drawings and paintings by the wife-and-husband artists Toshi Maruki and Iri Maruki, who had rushed to Hiroshima, where they had relatives, as soon as news of the bomb arrived.⁵

While the Marukis went on to publish a book of black and white drawings titled *Pika-don*, and exhibit murals documenting the horrors of the atomic aftermath in Hiroshima, the rest of Japan remained uninformed; actual photographs of the effects of the bombs remained censored until the end of the U.S. occupation in 1952.⁶

However, the talented cartoonist Katō Etsurō captured the early postwar sentiment of a defeated and exhausted nation, emasculated by two atomic bombs. Katō's own loyalties admittedly shifted with the political winds as before the Japanese surrender he had, "thrown his considerable skills into the war effort" creating anti-western propaganda.⁷ However, he apparently "came to his senses" after the war ended; on the first anniversary of the Japanese surrender, he published a collection entitled *Okurareta Kakumei*. This translates roughly into, "The Revolution We Have Been given."⁸ The opening illustration depicts an exhausted couple sprawled out on the ground, on August 15, 1945, the day of Japan's

⁵ Dower, 128

⁶ Ibid, 129

⁷ Dower, John W., *Embracing Defeat*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company/ The New Press. (1999) pp. 65

⁸ Ibid, 66

surrender. The man clutches a bamboo spear and the woman wears the protective hood worn by those fighting fires from the relentless U.S. air raids. Behind the couple is a radio, no doubt a symbol of the emperor's surrender broadcast. The caption of the cartoon speaks of the stupidity of pitting bamboo spears against atomic bombs.

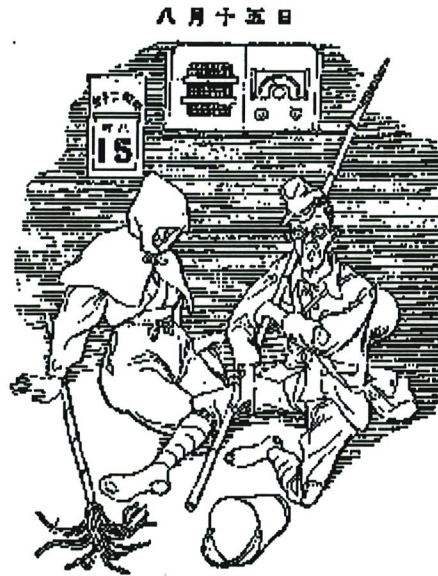


Figure 1 - This cartoon by Kato is one of the earliest examples of post war nuclear trauma in Japanese popular art

While early postwar feelings may have lamented the folly of a nation that had supposedly, “lost to science,” by the early 1950s, fear of a third World War had become palpable in Japan.⁹ The U.S. continued its nuclear testing at Bikini Atoll. In 1954, a Japanese fishing boat named *Lucky Dragon 5* was exposed to nuclear fallout from the American's testing, and one fisherman eventually died from the exposure to these “ashes of death.”¹⁰ The atomic trauma of *Lucky Dragon* seemed to grip all of Japan during this period: a social campaign to ban all nuclear weapons forever, started by Japanese housewives, gained

⁹ Dower, “The Bombed”, 136

¹⁰ Ibid, 136-137

momentum on the heels of the *Lucky Dragon* incident, and a petition started by these housewives generated more than thirty million signatures.¹¹

It was in the same year that one of the most enduring figures in all of Japanese popular culture was born: the film *Godzilla*. The story of *Godzilla* represents that of atomic horrors: in 1954 the monster is awakened from his eternal sleep by the American's nuclear testing at Bikini Atoll, and proceeds to attack Tokyo, the opening scenes even suggest American involvement by making allusions to the *Lucky Dragon* incident.¹² The expression of atomic trauma was suggested by the film's producer Tanaka Tomoyuki who saw *Godzilla* as, "an allegory for the new destructive power that human beings face, disembodied from its specific geopolitical origin."¹³ The theme of Japan being a country "defeated by science" is also visible in *Godzilla*, yet turned on its head: a Japanese scientist is able to create a weapon, the "Oxygen Destroyer" and this kills the monster and saves Japan from total destruction.¹⁴ *Godzilla* was the progenitor of the theme of total destruction followed by rebirth and renewal thanks to science. A monster such as *Godzilla* had never been created before in the Japanese imagination and "the dread of nuclear holocaust made an indelible mark on Japanese creativity, and this disquieting undercurrent would persist in popular culture for decades to come."¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid, 137

¹² Igarashi, Yoshikuni. *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (2000) pp. 115

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid, 116

¹⁵ Murakami, Takashi. (Ed) *Little Boy*. New York: Yale University Press. (2005) pp. 7



Figure 2 - Godzilla was awakened by the American's nuclear test at Bikini Atoll, 1954

While this dark and disquieting undercurrent would persist for years, it was the intensely personal images of a Hiroshima survivor – Keiji Nakazawa, age seven at the time of the bomb – that would catch the country by surprise. In the early 1970s, during the height of Japan’s economic miracle, Nakazawa published the serial manga “Barefoot Gen” (*Hadashi no Gen*) and achieved improbable success. The entire serial came to several thousand pages; it was eventually turned into an animated film, and recently into a television series.¹⁶ The semi-autobiographical story is a tale of post-nuclear holocaust survival by the protagonist Gen, and his mother. The author kept memories of Hiroshima repressed until his mother’s early death in 1966,¹⁷ he then began the series in 1972. The images of life in the immediate aftermath of Little Boy’s destruction are unusually intimate. The work is one Japanese artists representation of atomic trauma, and it also ripe with allegory, as the author describes his choice in naming of the protagonist:

“Gen” has several meanings in Japanese. It can mean the “root” or “origin” of something, but also “elemental” in the sense of an atomic element, as well as a “source” of vitality and happiness. I envisioned Gen as barefoot,

¹⁶ Dower, “The Bombed”, 38

¹⁷ Nakazawa, Keiji. “A Note from the Author”, *Barefoot Gen: The Day After* (vol. 2), San Francisco: Last Gasp of San Francisco. (2004)

standing firmly atop the burnt-out rubble of Hiroshima, raising his voice against war and nuclear weapons. Gen is my alter ego, and his family is just like my own.¹⁸



Figure 3 - "Little Boy" explodes over Hiroshima in Keiji Nakazawa's "Barefoot Gen"

Themes of the enormity of nuclear weapons and the power of science, as well as the resilience of those who experienced the atomic bombs have become major themes in modern Japanese art. The marriage of themes in Japanese art is visible in two major fictional animated television series (*anime*) in the mid 1970s, *Space Battleship Yamato* and the *Time Bokan Series*.

The progenitor of modern *otaku* culture, the series *Space Battleship Yamato* (known in America as *Star Blazers*), was aired in Japan in 1974-75. It originally received dismally low ratings as it was poorly marketed to young children, which was to prove the wrong demographic.¹⁹ However, the series began to attract independent attention, and was released as a blockbuster movie in 1977. Young adults were attracted to its unique "mecha" (*mecha*) anime style, as well as to its story. The plot which, "betrays an obvious complex about Japan's defeat in war, revolves around the greatest battleship in all of Japan's history – the

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ *Little Boy*. 27

Yamato. The [real] Yamato sank right after its sortie in World War II, but in the television series it is resurrected and used as a spaceship to protect Earth when it is invaded by aliens.²⁰ A notable feature of this anime is that like *Godzilla*, it relies on the narrative device of radiation; the primary threat from the aliens is the nuclear radiation from their bombs. Exactly thirty years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "... the Japanese experience of the atomic bombings was beginning to fade into the past, but the memory could not be forgotten."²¹



Figure 4 - The rebuilt Yamato flies into deep space to save humanity from nuclear radiation

The 1975-76 *Time Bokan* Series was another influential television *anime* that drew upon the themes of atomic destruction, science and renewal. Successfully marketed to youngsters, the slapstick comedy of the anime featured the heroes engaging in hilarious “mecha-battles” (battles using giant mechanical devices). Each episode would end with the demise of the villains, symbolized by a skull-and-crossbones mushroom cloud.²² However, these villains would be brought back, literally resurrected, in subsequent episodes with no explanation.

²⁰ Schimmel, Paul, “Making Murakami”, in *Murakami*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art. 2007 54

²¹ *Little Boy*. 27

²² *Ibid*

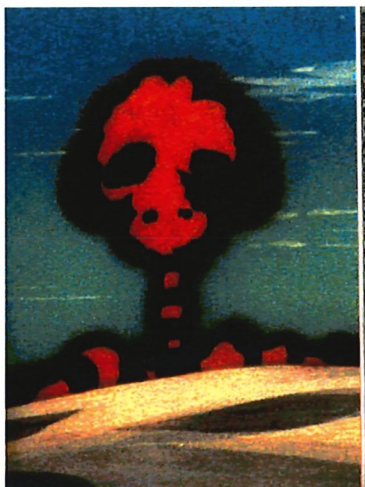


Figure 5 - The villains in Time Bokan go up in a mushroom cloud at the end of each episode, and then return the subsequent week without explanation

From the cartoons of Katō, to Godzilla and Space Battleship Yamato, the experience of the atomic bombs has left an indelible impression on the Japanese consciousness; the thematic undertones of defeat, humiliation, the power of science and the threat of nuclear annihilation in the shadow of the mushroom cloud have influenced a generations of artists and arguably spawned a national culture centered on the aesthetic of *kawaii* (cute) and *otaku* (nerd, or geek) enshrined in the Japanese subculture of Neo Pop.^{23 24} The legacy of the atomic attacks, Japan’s humiliation and defeat is alive and well in this Japanese Neo Pop, and its form is perfectly embodied in the works of one Japan’s most influential living artist: Takashi Murakami.

***The Making of Murakami –
Educating a modern master***

*“What do you think of Takashi Murakami?”
mu-ra-ka-mi ta-ka-shi o do o-moy-mas ka?*

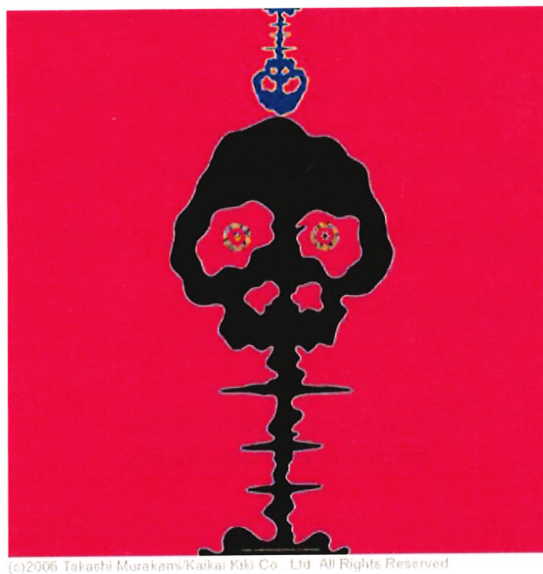
PHRASE THREE OF THE SEVEN PHRASES ON “ART”
IN THE, *LONLEY PLANET JAPANESE PHRASEBOOK*²⁵

²³ *Little Boy*. 27

²⁴ The word *otaku* in Japanese literally means “your house,” and implies one’s reluctance to leave their home. In modern Japanese parlance, it is used to refer to those with obsessive interests, particularly in anime, manga and video games.

²⁵ Abe, Yoshi, *Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook*, 4th ed. Oakland: Lonely Planet Publications, (2004) pp. 255

On the morning of August 9th, 1945 the B-29 bomber *Bock's Car* had abandoned its original target – the city of Kokura – due to cloudy weather and instead dropped the 2nd atomic bomb, “Fat Man” on the city of Nagasaki. Takashi Murakami’s mother was a resident of Kokura in the final days of the Pacific War; perhaps it was destiny that Murakami would become an artist whose works were profoundly influenced by the experience of the atomic bombs. Indeed, his mother often told him: “Takashi, you are very lucky. If Kokura had not been cloudy that day, you wouldn’t be here today.”²⁶ Though Murakami claims he stopped listening to his mother about such things after the age of 10, such a background makes it understandable why the mushroom cloud has become a prevalent theme in the artist’s works. Whatever Murakami may think or say about his works, it is clear that the history of U.S.-Japan relations have had a profound impact on the artist.



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Figure 6 - Time Bokan "Pink" by Takashi Murakami

Murakami himself was not of extravagant origins; his mother did needlepoint as a side job and his father had briefly served in the SDF as a tank operator and later relocated to Tokyo, where Murakami was born in 1962. Paul Schimmel writes of the importance

²⁶ Schimmel, 53

in understanding the generational significance of Murakami, “for his generation, once removed from the survivors of the war, the necessity of reconciling traditional cultural practices with contemporary social conditions, including the growing influence of American culture was an urgent reality.”²⁷ Despite growing up with exposure to both Eastern and Western art, it was Japanese animation and manga (here on referred to as “animanga”) that had the most impact on the young Murakami. As a child, his favorite animated series was Space Battleship Yamato. He had also been impressed by the unique visual techniques in the 1979-81 animated series Galaxy Express 999, directed by Yoshinori Kanada. “By the time that Galaxy Express 999 became a hit and ‘Kanada effect’ Asian animation was being produced in mass quantities, Murakami knew that he wanted to become an animator.”²⁸

In 1980, Murakami enrolled at the *nihonga* department at the prestigious Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music (colloquially referred to as *geidai* in Japanese). *Nihonga* literally means “Japanese-style” painting, and it was, “developed during the Meiji period (1868-1912) to pose a resistance to the influence of Western-art through the revitalization of the traditions of Japanese painting and their synthesis with aspects of Western art.”²⁹ Impressed by the service-oriented ambition to entertain the audience of the legendary Japanese animator and director Hayao Miyazaki, Murakami originally aspired to become a background animator. Scenes of cherry blossoms from Miyazaki’s 1979 television series were particularly inspiring to a young Murakami.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid, 54

²⁸ Ibid, 56

²⁹ Ibid, 57

³⁰ Ibid



Figure 7 - Anne of Green Gables, by Hayao Miyazaki (1979)

In the seventh year of an eleven-year journey as a *nihonga* student, Murakami realized that his true desire was to become a contemporary artist.³¹ At the end of his formal education, Murakami had obtained a PhD in *nihonga*, yet the influences of contemporary animanga were, and remain, a powerful undercurrent in his work; Murakami's ability to combine seemingly dissimilar styles would become the thesis of his most powerful works. While the child Murakami was influenced by animanga steeped in themes of science, technology and the atom, the education of the artist Murakami laid the foundations for his unique ability to synthesize disparate themes. Murakami was born an *otaku* and matured into an artist. This process of maturation would enable Murakami to formulate his own theory of art, one that breaks down barriers between high and low art and to take in the full sweep of postwar Japanese culture. This theory, the very style of Murakami, is known as Superflat.³²

**The Development of "Superflat" –
Murakami's brave new thesis**

"It is the art at the center of a Japanese culture that lacks prestige, authority, celebration and cost."

TAKASHI MURAKAMI,
FROM "THE SUPER FLAT MANIFESTO"³³

³¹ Ibid, 58

³² Little Boy. 27

³³ Ibid, 35

Murakami seems to be a master of manipulating dualities, and Superflat itself exists as a dual nature. In a concrete sense, it is a trilogy of exhibits,³⁴ in the abstract sense it is Murakami's own concept and critique of modern Japanese art. It is the thesis that he has truly made his own. Murakami has devoted the three exhibitions, numerous essays and interviews, and two catalogues to exploring the concept of Superflat,. Murakami freely uses the term to refer to a variety of "flat" features that are prominent in his art, most notable among these features are:

- 1) The freedom to enter the reality of a scene through a gaze that can come from any angle (the flattening of linear perspective).
- 2) The horizontally organized nature of Japanese culture, in which Western art/craft and high/low distinctions do not apply (flattening the barrier between art and commerce)
- 3) The flat-screen world of digital imaging (Murakami: "the working environment of computer graphics, flat-panel monitors, or the forceful integration of data into an image³⁵)
- 4) *The ground-zero flattening of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the nuclear strikes of 1945*³⁶ (the literal flattening of physical space).

Emphasis was added to the fourth principle because it is particularly relevant to this study. Notably, the catalog and exhibit *Little Boy* exemplify the fourth principle and the direct affect that atomic trauma has had on Murakami's Superflat art, and by extension, all Japanese popular art. *Little Boy* will be examined in detail below, but first it will be beneficial to examine some of Murakami's earlier works in order find the continuity in both his artistic style and method of critiquing modern Japanese culture and identity.

³⁴ The Superflat project began in 2000, with the publication of the book *Super Flat* which accompanied an exhibition of the same name. Part 2 was the exhibition *Coloriage* in 2002, but this had no catalogue. The series concludes with the publication of the book *Little Boy* in 2005, along with an exhibition of the same name.

³⁵ *Little Boy*. 27

³⁶ Hebdige, Dick, "Flat Boy vs. Skinny: Takashi Murakami and the Battle for Japan", *Murakami*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art. (2007) pp. 23

Randoseru Project. In an essay on Murakami's Superflat style, British media theorist Dick Hebdige astutely notes that, "Prior to the Superflat system, Murakami's preoccupation with the matrix of humiliation as the key to postwar Japanese identity in particular and "Americanized" identity in general had found formal expression in a series of heavily metaphorical works."³⁷ One of Murakami's earliest critiques of Japanese identity and humiliation was the 1991 exhibit *Randoseru Project*. The exhibit consists of eight super-colorful Japanese backpacks known as *randoseru* – the name derives from the Dutch word *ransel* – that were imported en masse to Japan in the Meiji period, and whose design was originally based on military packs. Today the original connection to the military has been lost and today *randoseru* are worn by elementary students. Murakami is not quick to forget Japan's dark past, and in his exhibit he invokes something terrible. Close inspection of *Randoseru Project* reveals that the backpacks are not made of the traditional leather, rather they are composed of rare, controversial (and perhaps illegal) materials: the skins of great blue shark, cobra, crocodile, two types of harp seal, hippopotamus and sei whale skins.³⁸ With this violent exhibit, Murakami both explores art's status as a luxury good and comments on the exploitation of endangered species to produce such luxury goods.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid, 30-31

³⁸ Schimmel, 60

³⁹ Murakami himself admits that the decision to use the endangered animals skins came in a "moment of darkness" and that he did not intend to be cynical; prior to the opening of the exhibit, a Shinto priest prayed before the backpacks to honor the animals from which they were made. (Schimmel,62)



Figure 8 - One of the inconspicuous backpacks from Murakami's *Randoseru Project*. It's not as innocent as it looks.

Polyrhythm. Around the same time he created *Randoseru Project*, Murakami began to use plastic World War II toy soldiers to explore the complex postwar relationship between Japan and the United States.⁴⁰ Murakami himself said, "...[in movies] there is a tie between war and heroism... war is actually a tragedy, but if you change your mindset it's exotic. Our society's paradox is that we create plastic toy models that create a background for aggression and murder."⁴¹ For *Polyrhythm*, he affixed a score of 1/35 scale U.S. Infantry soldiers to a large, ugly slab of synthetic resin. The use of such an unsightly object is connected to his feeling that, "we use horrible, non-recyclable material, which essentially becomes oversize garbage when you work with it to make our 'dream' discos, Disney Lands, and theme parks."⁴² In *Polyrhythm*, Murakami also comments on the infantilization of the Japanese by sending back General MacArthur's "little boy" insult; MacArthur made the remark that measured by the standards of modern civilization, the Japanese were "like a boy of twelve" during a three-day testimony to the U.S. Senate in 1951.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 60

⁴¹ Ibid, 59-60

⁴² Ibid, 60



Figure 9 - Toy plastic soldiers superimposed on an ugly piece of resin in *Polyrhythm*

Sea Breeze. The themes of violence and the expression of atomic trauma are married for the first time in Murakami's 1992 work *Sea Breeze*. This piece can in retrospect, "be read as [Murakami's] first reference to the atomic bomb: sixteen Klieg lights arrange back-to-back in a circle are encased in a square metal cabinet with roll-up doors. When the doors open, they expose the viewer to a blinding white light that suggests the flash before destruction." *Sea Breeze* is Murakami's visualization of the "pika" in the atomic *pika-don*, and his first foray into embracing the ground-zero flattening of Hiroshima/Nagasaki as a principle of Superflat.



村上 隆
 《シーブリーズ》
 1992
 鉄、ステンレス、シャッター、水銀灯、キャスト、車輪、換気扇、点滅灯
 H350 x W480 x D250 cm
 金沢21世紀美術館蔵
 © 1992 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

Figure 10 - The blinding atomic flash of *Sea Breeze*

Mr. DOB – From “Mickey” to Atomic-Panda. Perhaps no work of Murakami’s better exemplifies the development of his artistic style than his signature character, Mr. DOB.⁴³ The character has become Murakami’s mascot, and Mr. DOB appears in various incarnations throughout a variety of works. Early incarnations show him as cute and innocent enough, almost like an Asiatic cousin to Mickey Mouse.

⁴³ Murakami describes how a late-night word game in 1993 led to the name for this character: “For one or two hours we said ‘dobozite dobozite’ [a phrase popularized by Noburu Kawasaki’s 1970s *manga Inakappe Taishō*, (Country general) in which characters deliberately mispronounce “dōshite” (why) as “dobozite dobozite”]... a female friend said ‘*oshamanbe*’, which was a popular gag at the time, and maybe a sexual reference. I wanted to create a *dobozite, dobozite oshamanbe* show.” With the assistance of another young artist, Manabu Koga, Murakami used the acronym DOB to create a character who was a cross between Doraemon and Sonic the Hedgehog... Mr. DOB was born. (Schimmel, 65)

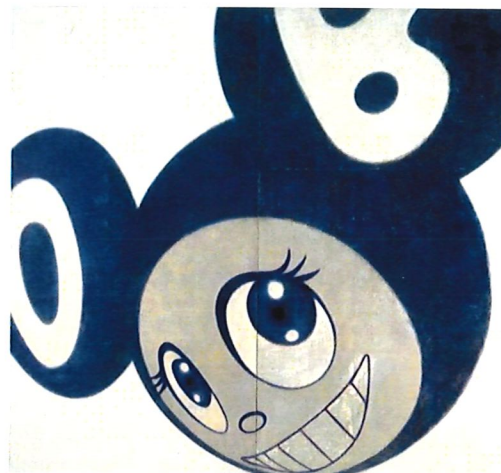


Figure 11 - An early, friendly, incarnation of Mr. DOB

Gradually, the figure of Mr. DOB becomes more tortured over time. Hebdige informs us on the transformative journey of Mr. DOB:

“by dragging the Mickey Mouse silhouette through a series of alternately ecstatic, carnivorous, lobotomized, vulnerable and super-cute permutations, [Murakami] mangles the Disney corporation’s copy-protected rodent DNA and the presumption of eternal innocence encoded at its core, waiving immunity to foreign infection, exposing it to the universally disfiguring fallout from the Little Boy and Fat Man detonations.”⁴⁴



Figure 12 - Mr. DOB and several of his mutations – from “cute” to “monstrous”

⁴⁴ Hebdige, 23

In Murakami's 2003 work, *Panda*, Mr. DOB's irradiated journey of mutation is complete. The sculpture is an unmistakable mutation of Mr. DOB, utterly androgynous as it perches on an antique Louis Vuitton trunk. It's aesthetic straddles an almost uncomfortable border between cute and grotesque; its psychedelic colors and mutated eyes suggest the fallout from the atomic explosions. Yet rather than appearing menacing, the panda is frightening childish. With *Panda*, Murakami uncovers the taboo that is the dark side of Mickey Mouse and all things Western, and brings them together in an image cute enough for children, yet mature enough in message to leave an unforgettable impression on any adult viewer. Hebdige notes the significance of the work to Murakami's critical style, "*Panda* marks Murakami's move away from the sequestered seriousness of U.S. – centric political and conceptual art to a subliminal engagement with the... infantilizing effects of an aggressively Americanized global culture."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Hebdige, 35



Figure 13 – *Panda* joins the themes of nuclear trauma and the infantilizing effect of the West

While *Panda* shows the maturation of Murakami as an artist, the power of his Superflat thesis is found in the third and final installment of the *Superflat* trilogy: *Little Boy*.

*Little Boy –
The third and final installment of the Superflat Trilogy*

With “Little Boy,” Murakami states that his purpose is “to go back to the origin of our postwar trauma.”

ALEXANDRA MUNROE
IN *INTRODUCING LITTLE BOY*⁴⁶



Figure 14 - The first plate, forming a prelude to the main body of *Little Boy*. In this work Murakami joins the cute and the horrific, seen here with the “happy” mushroom clouds, an obvious reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Little Boy, released in 2005, is the third and final installment of Murakami’s artistic journey, *Superflat*. It was released as both a catalogue and an exhibit. The very title of the work speaks directly to the themes of atomic trauma and infantilization at the hands of the West, themes previously expressed in works such as *Panda*. Many art critics, such as Dick Hebdige, view *Little Boy* as a direct expression of “Japan vs. The West.” In the words of Hebdige:

“Under the Little Boy rubric, [Murakami] dispatches a small army of mutant figurines to New York City to take down a peg or two, David-vs.-Goliath style, Little Boy’s older sibling (Bob’s) Big Boy, the oversized juvenile mascot for the once-ubiquitous burger chain founded in Glendale California in 1936, (with a branch still in Tokyo).”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Munroe, Alexandra, “Introducing Little Boy”, in *Little Boy*. New York: Yale University Press. (2005) pp. 249

⁴⁷ Hebdige, 30



Figure 15 - The mascot for the American hamburger chain, and according to Dick Hebdige, the simultaneous older brother and nemesis of Murakami's *Little Boy*.

The catalogue *Little Boy* is edited by Murakami himself and it begins with nearly 50 plates of contemporary Japanese art from a variety of artists. Each plate is complete with detailed explanations on what the work expresses and it is significant. After Murakami's opening plate (see above) the main body of *Little Boy* begins with Tarō Okamoto's famous monument, *Tower of the Sun*, superimposed on the image is the artist's equally famous 1968 quote, "art is explosion" (*bijutsu ha bakuhatsu da!*).⁴⁸ This work sets the tone for the following plates in the rest of the catalogue. However, a quick thumb-through of the plates might cause one to wrinkle their eyebrows; at first glance, the works seem to be a strange combination of the horrific and the über-cute. Pictures of a devastated Hiroshima and Godzilla destroying Tokyo are juxtaposed with the children's figurines of Kitahara and the ubiquitously loved character *Doraemon*.

To those uninitiated to the works of Murakami, this would indeed appear to be a strange, almost random, combination of works. However, as we have seen, such a juxtaposition of the cute and the terrible is quite consistent with Murakami's style. The true power of Murakami's *Superflat* message is made manifest in the catalogue *Little*

⁴⁸ Little Boy, 2-3

Boy: here the artist states unequivocally that out of the atomic horrors of the past, and the subsequent humiliation and emasculation by a foreign occupation, an entire national culture of *otaku* and *kawaii* (cute) – a culture heretofore misunderstood by Westerners and Japanese alike – was born.

In the pages immediately following Okamoto's *Tower of the Sun*, Murakami shows us what he believes is the ultimate symbol of maturation of *otaku* culture, the *Daicon IV Opening Animation*. Murakami sees special significance in this work, as evidenced by it receiving twice as many visual and descriptive pages than the others in *Little Boy*. The opening animation was shown at the 22nd annual Japan SF (science fiction) Convention, held in Osaka in 1983; the convention, inaugurated in 1962, remains an event by *otaku* for *otaku*.⁴⁹ (The convention is called *Daicon* in Japanese.) Murakami writes in *Little Boy* that the 8mm animated film, about five minutes in length, not only shows a high level of artistry for independent films, but also points to elements of the subculture that would become *otaku*.⁵⁰ The *Daicon IV Opening Animation* follows in the footsteps of *Godzilla* and *Space Battleship Yamato* in bringing together the themes of nuclear trauma, the power of science, destruction and rebirth. As Murakami writes:

In the final sequence [of the animation] the theme of “destruction and regeneration” is imaginatively reinterpreted. The energetic flight through the sky of a girl in a bunny costume is followed by the explosion of what could only be described as an atomic bomb, which destroys everything. In a pink-hued blast, petals of cherry blossoms – Japan's national flower – spread over the city, which is then burned to ashes, as trees die on mountains and the earth is turned into a barren landscape. When the spaceship DAICON, a symbol for *otaku* floating in the sky, launches a powerful “*otaku*” beam, the earth is covered with green, as giant trees sprout instantly from the ground. The world is revived, becoming a place of life where people joyously gather together.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Little Boy*, 10

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

⁵¹ *Ibid*

With the inclusion of the opening animation in *Little Boy*, Murakami identifies a group of artists, (the *otaku*) who have found something liberating in the power of destruction, and are announcing a revolution in pictorial form, any regard for the political correctness of the atomic bombings in Japan is simply thrown out the window.⁵²

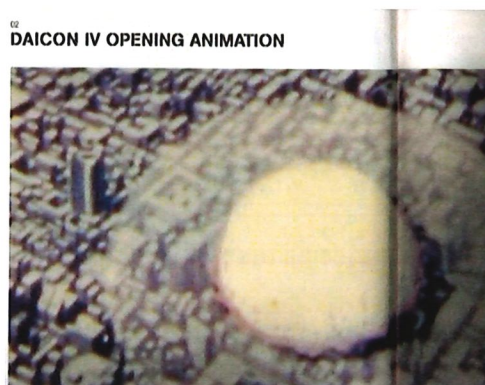


Figure 16 - In the opening animation, a nuclear blast that destroys the city is immediately followed by a rain of cherry blossom as the city is returned to life

It is interesting to note that in Murakami's entire *Little Boy* catalogue, the only work of his own that he includes in the main body is Time Bokan – Pink, (see above). The inclusion of his work connects the spaces between *otaku*, animation, atomic trauma and Murakami's own art. In the words of Alexandra Munroe, Time Bokan serves as the ultimate representation of the atomic bomb's ghost:

Against a brightly colored, superflat background, a black mushroom cloud portrayed as a mouthless, mute skull rises dead-center like a totem of death as figured by a child. The inherent threat of this image is then perversely revoked by its eyeballs, which are composed of wreaths of the multicolored, smiling flower-faces that brand Murakami's work. Here Murakami quotes a famous and beloved children's cartoon in which the horror of national disaster and nuclear threat has become so abstracted, so 'flattened' as to be rendered cute.⁵³

The placement of Time Bokan – Pink, in relation to other works in *Little Boy* is also telling; the visually pleasing mushroom clouds – the white for Hiroshima and the navy-

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Munroe, 249

blue for Nagasaki – are sandwiched in-between the Daicon opening animation plates, and a plate for the supposed source of Japan’s infantilization at the hands of the west: Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. The document, drafted by general headquarters (GHQ) under General Douglas Macarthur during the Allied occupation, explicitly renounces war “as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.” Murakami’s thoughts on the effect this has had upon the Japanese is crystal clear: “However just or unjust the American position may have been at the time, it cast Japan in the role of a ‘child’ obliged to follow America’s ‘adult’ guidance, and the nation willingly complied.”⁵⁴

The overall effect of the *Little Boy* catalogue is captured well by Murakami critic Alexandra Munroe: “In *Little Boy*, Murakami demonstrates how the national experience of atomic disaster has created a graphic subculture obsessed with what has been termed the ‘postnuclear sublime... an exhilarating mixture of dread and desire.’”⁵⁵ In the eight opening plates of *Little Boy*, Murakami provides the main thrust of the catalogue. He also identifies one of the major themes of his *Superflat* thesis: the concept that modern Japanese *otaku* and *kawaii* culture has its roots in the trauma of the atomic bombs and the infantilization of Allied occupation and Article 9.

⁵⁴ *Little Boy*, 22-23

⁵⁵ Munroe, 248

**Conclusion –
An artist, a business, a man and a message**

All 'conclusions' after all are in the end reversible, all disasters, however great with great difficulty, redeemable: after the humans, the monsters, after the monsters, the humans.

DICK HEBDIGE
ESSAY ON MURAKAMI'S STYLE⁵⁶

With the catalogue *Little Boy*, Murakami's epic *Superflat* thesis comes to an end. The work "goes beyond the spectacular optics of Japan's popular culture to identify the terrifying fantasies of a graphic subculture centered on the imagery of atomic explosion and post-apocalyptic salvation."⁵⁷ When most Japanese hear the word "Little Boy," they are quick to conjure images of a catastrophic military defeat that represents a narrative of humiliation. However, to Murakami, the imagery and meaning of *Little Boy* also suggests a culture and politics of infantilization.⁵⁸ The visual articulation of this culture is perhaps the greatest strength and most enduring quality of Murakami's work. The influence of Murakami the artist – from the *otaku* filled streets of Akihabara to the display cases of Louis Vuitton stores and beyond – has been prolific. And there is another aspect of this man that has drawn as much criticism as it has praise: Murakami the businessman.

Thanks to his savvy publicity and ability to attach his art to brand names, Takashi Murakami is often called the "Andy Warhol of Japan."⁵⁹ While such a label may be a bit of a stretch, it is certainly the case that Murakami is just as much of a businessman as he is an artist. His company, KaiKai KiKi, is a sophisticated assembly line that employs over 100 people. It is central to the production of his art, and therefore much more sophisticated and serious than was Warhol's party-ready "Factory" ever was. Murakami

⁵⁶ Hebdige, 51

⁵⁷ Munroe, 246

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ "Japanese Contemporary Art: Infantile Capitalism", *The Economist* (April 19, 2008) online source accessed [5/1/2010] www.economist.com

himself argues that in his *Superflat* trilogy, an inherent quality is the radical interconnection and lack of distinction between Japan's fine and popular art. KaiKai KiKi is in fact, ground zero for the artist's project of blurring the distinction between high art and low art, which Murakami himself argues is an entirely Western concept. With such "high-low" distinctions thrown out the window, Murakami is able to create an art with a broad public appeal that also remains relevant in the modern world of mass consumption.

Some criticize Murakami as being an excessive financial realist, whose *Superflat* trilogy really represents a type of "infantile capitalism... an unbridled embrace of commercialism [that] seems more honest than cynical."⁶⁰ This is not an outrageous or entirely indefensible label, however Munroe better describes the business-art power combination that fuels the work of Murakami:

[Murakami] is a stronger assault than Andy Warhol's Pop Art, which lifted commercial products like Brillo boxes and advertising mediums like silkscreen from the supermarket and street billboard to the gallery and museum. Murakami's thrust goes the other way, extending the concept of "fine arts" into the gigantic, global marketplace of TV, comic books, video games, fashion and the Internet.⁶¹

There are other critics who think that the intentions of Murakami's *Superflat* thesis may be slightly disingenuous. While generally receptive to the works of Murakami, the Japan scholar and New York Review of Books critic Ian Buruma finds the message of Japan's humiliation and infantilization behind *Little Boy* to be over the top:

All this strikes me as wildly exaggerated... the humiliation of feeling dominated by Western civilization for more than two hundred years cannot be dismissed. But to explain contemporary Japanese culture entirely through the prism of postwar trauma is much too glib.⁶²

⁶⁰ The Economist (April 19, 2008)

⁶¹ Munroe, 245

⁶² Buruma, Ian, "Virtual Violence", from The New York Review of Books (June, 2005) online source accessed [5/16/2010] www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2005/jun/23/virtual-violence/?page=2

The final assessment on the importance of Murakami's art most likely lies somewhere between the lavish praise of media critics like Dick Hebdige and Japan scholars like Ian Buruma. Murakami the man is a talented, hard working and well-trained painter who has carved a comfortable niche for himself as a contemporary artist in a "realist" modern society. His motivations are not entirely cynical, as he undeniably has a message that he desires to share. His work *Little Boy*, the completion of his *Superflat* journey, joins disparate and seemingly unrelated elements to convincingly argue that the modern culture of Japanese *kawaii* and *otaku* are deeply connected to something far more sinister than the futuristic robots of *Gundam* and the friendly *Hello Kitty* would ever betray to the casual consumer. And the fact that the casual consumer – most likely destined to remain unaware of the true depth of the artist's message – is Murakami's intended audience does not injuriously detract from the power of his ideas. Murakami is an artist, and a businessman, but at the end of the day he is simply human. His works – pasted onto Louis Vuitton bags or otherwise – cry for a return to the honor, the power and the understanding of what it means to be human.

After the completion of *Little Boy*, Murakami produced a larger-than life mural, *Tan-Tan Bo Puking*. It is as grotesque as it is attractive; it is a simultaneous psychic expulsion of bile and a shining artistic achievement. Murakami claims that it is the closest thing he ever created to a self-portrait, and the work perfectly illustrates a quote by Ian Buruma on Murakami's art (which was incidentally written before the creation of the mural):

"It is certainly interesting to see what is going on in the world of contemporary Japan. That is often looks so pretty makes it all the more disturbing."⁶³

⁶³ Buruma

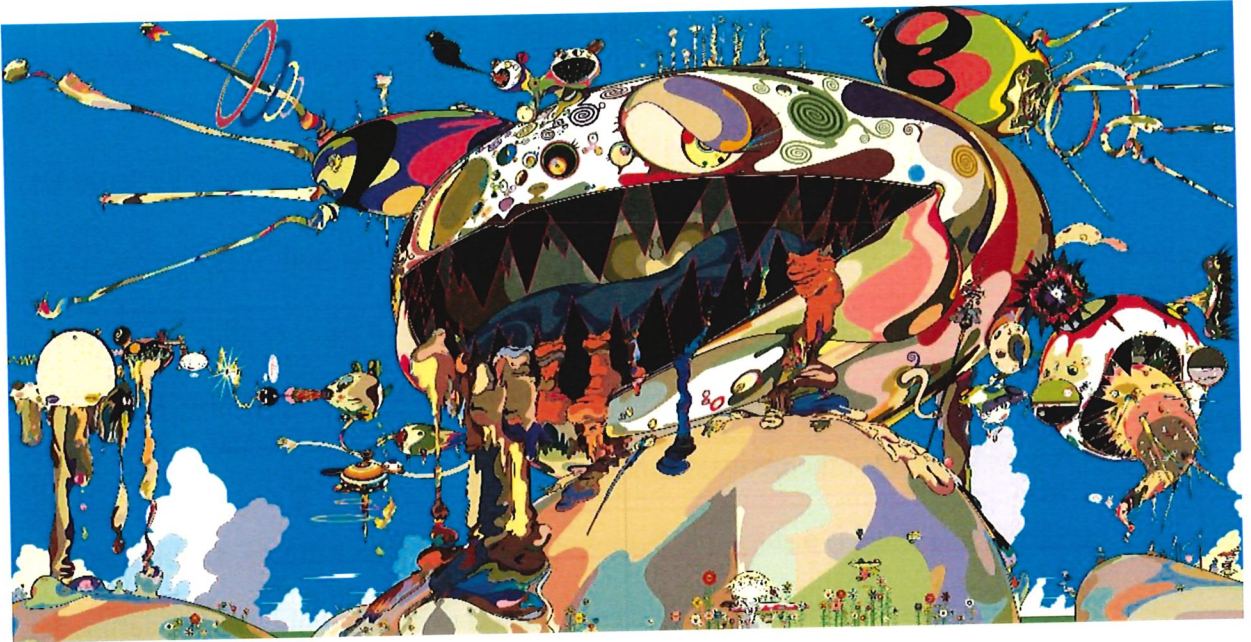


Figure 17 - Tan-Tan Bo Puking

Perhaps, like all great art, the true power and message of Murakami's work is best found in the eye of the beholder.

Brandon Wright

University of Washington

Bibliographic Essay

My initial goal was to examine postwar popular art in Japan, and connect them with the thread of “nuclear trauma.” Initially, I thought this might be a difficult task yet I was soon overwhelmed by the amount of possibilities. I quickly decided, at the suggestion of my Professor, to narrow my focus to one artist, Takashi Murakami. However, I still wanted to briefly survey some works leading up to Murakami to serve as a background (or theoretical framework, to borrow a political science term) for my analysis. Since this is a story that begins at the end of the Pacific War, understanding the nature of its end was critical. We encountered myriad helpful sources during our seminar on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and to my study, Richard Frank’s Downfall was particularly useful.

The first Japanese artist to begin creating commercial pop art in the postwar era was Katō Etsuro, and his political cartoons were a valuable addition to my study. I am grateful to the University of Washington’s East Asian Librarian, Keiko Yokota-Carter, for helping me get a hold of a rare compilation of works by Katō. On understanding the cultural impact of Godzilla, Yoshikuni Igarashi’s book, Bodies of Memory was an excellent guide. Next, the haunting *manga* Barefoot Gen by Keiji Nakazawa was helpful for putting a human face on suffering of the survivors of the atomic nightmare.

With the nature of my analysis focused, the next step was the endeavor to better understand the art of Takashi Murakami. This consisted of researching in three distinct stages, the first was to find what others have written about the artist, the second was finding what the artist has to say about himself, and the third stage has been to formulate my own thoughts about the meaning and impact of Murakami’s art. The first stage, seeking what others have written about Murakami, was initially

overwhelming, as the artist has been widely discussed in both Japanese and English discourse. The early decision to limit my empirical focus of Murakami's works to his *Superflat* trilogy, in particular *Little Boy*, helped to focus my search.

In seeking biographical information and researching the influences and artistic style of Murakami, the compilation *Murakami* edited by Paul Schimmel was by far the most useful work I happened upon. (I'm grateful to coworker, Jon Holt, a PhD in Japanese literature, who initially suggested this collection to me). The opening essay by Dick Hebdige, while perhaps a little *too* praiseworthy, was essential for understanding Murakami's style and the development of his *Superflat* thesis as it translates into his everyday works. The following essay, *Making Murakami* by Paul Schimmel was the best biographical description of Murakami I encountered. Also essential for understanding the impact of Murakami's work in modern discourse are the writings of the modern philosopher (and friend of Murakami) Hiroki Azuma. Azuma is particularly interested in the cultural impact of *Superflat*. At the end of the first *Superflat* catalogue, Azuma writes a fascinating essay that compares Murakami's concept of the flattening of linear perspective to that of Holbein's famous 1533 painting, *The Ambassadors*. I constantly tried to find a way to include parts of the essay in this paper, but ultimately it remained out of my scope for this project.

Of course, others have been more critical of the work of Murakami. At the suggestion of a former classmate, Ryan Kelly, (who worked for Murakami for a year) I was able to find several articles and essays to help form a counterbalance to the lavish praise of writers such as Hebdige. In particular, a critical (yet slightly shallow) review of *Little Boy* by the Economist, and a very helpful critique of *Little Boy* by Ian Buruma helped to keep everything in perspective.

Clearly, the catalogue *Little Boy* was the most critical piece of analysis made in this study. The work is edited by Murakami himself and in addition to being an intellectual and visual pleasure to peruse, the work forms the capstone of Murakami's *Superflat* thesis. The fascinating layout of the first series of plates contains everything from Okamoto's *Tower of the Sun* and a devastated Hiroshima, to Godzilla, Doraemon and Article 9. I found Murakami's message here to be particularly relevant to my initial goal of finding examples of nuclear trauma in postwar pop art. The essays at the end of the catalogue were also enlightening. In particular, Munroe's concluding essay, *Introducing Little Boy* was critical to helping me understand the overall impact and significance of the *Little Boy* exhibit and catalogue.

Finally, all but three of the images that appear in this essay were retrieved thanks to *Google Images*. While I am at times dubious of the claim that our fast-paced, digital world is necessarily *better* than the past, I am undeniably thankful for the ability to quickly and effortlessly copy and past the images I sought into this paper; it literally saved me hours of scanning.

This was a fascinating project to undertake, and throughout my research I came to better understand the works of a popular artist. However, I also came to the unexpected realization that the modern culture of Japan, with its videogames and Gundam robots and Hello Kitty dolls – one that I now realize I unwittingly took for granted during my years in Japan – is in a very real sense deeply connected to the end of the Pacific War and the subsequent occupation by the United States. While many debate the exact nature of this connection, the works that I have analyzed clearly show me that its existence is undeniable. I am grateful for this opportunity to be able to pull so many disparate threads together into one comprehensible work. And at the end of it all I have to say that the picture I have created, it looks super flat.

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