A Reevaluation of the Importance of Mushi Pro’s Three Adult-Oriented Animated Films in the Development of Japanese Animation

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Introduction

Animation is constantly adapting to the newest technology, ongoing changes in popular culture, as well as incorporating various elements from media such as film, comics/manga, fine art and so on. As animation scholar Paul Wells states in *Animation: Genre and Authorship* “… It can be argued that historically, aesthetically and technologically, animation is an intrinsically modern form. In all of its incarnations and progressions it has sought to ‘modernise’ its own process, outcome and cultural import” (30). It is these particular processes that are continuously expanding its possibilities.

In recent years, it is evident that many commercial animated films are heading towards computer-generated hyper-realist visual presentation. At the same time, there is an increasing number of artists and production houses producing high quality animated films with a mixture of forms and approaches. This tendency is evident in international festivals like the International Animation Festival Hiroshima 2006 and the Platform Animation Festival 2007. Most works shown portray a strong sense of graphic design, employing a combination of both high-end computer and traditional animating
techniques. It seems like these animators are giving close attention to the most appropriate techniques to enhance their goal, which could be a narrative or abstract visual performance. These creators utilize the convenience of software as a tool while attempting to avoid the clichéd look produced by certain software. Computer graphics techniques may produce three-dimensional imagery with a two-dimensional feel, or a child-like hand-drawn style with fluid motion as seen in Isabelle Favez’s Apple Pie (2006). It can also act as a tool to help render the images of Phil Mulloy’s two-dimensional characters with limited motion in his cynical and provocative Cowboys series.

Malcolm Sutherland’s Birdcalls (2006), a fun short rich in visual presentation and meaning is animated using a simple mixture of live-action and an animated image demonstrating a synthetic approach. His work shows that the quality of a good animation is dependent on imagination rather than application of fancy techniques. Animators enrich their creative environment by making use of technological advances. At the same time, they also try to draw upon animation’s rich historical context by exploring the different accomplishments of their predecessors to gain inspiration to creating their own distinctive style. They are stimulated by awareness of different historical animation mediums (such as cut-outs, puppets, sand, silhouette, clay, pixilation and etc.) which had been overshadowed by cel animation. Paul Wells expresses a similar idea on the short animated film The Weather (1995) in Animation: Genre and Authorship: “...[It] foregrounds the associative language imbued in the animated form, and the ways in which ‘technology’ works in the service of the art form, and not merely as a recording device. Animators constantly seek to ally traditional techniques with progressive technologies, refreshing and re-inventing the form in a spirit which constantly speaks to the view of animation as a ‘modernist’ art” (13). This fusion of styles and techniques are not necessarily limited to works shown at festivals, but are increasingly
popular in television animated series, web animation and even various images on our handphone screens.

In this paper, I have chosen three theatrically released adult-oriented animated films, *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969), *Cleopatra* (1971) and *Belladonna* (1973) created by Tezuka Osamu and Mushi Pro in the early 1970s for my case study. Although these films were not the world’s first adult-oriented animations as Tezuka and Mushi Pro claimed and are imperfect in many respects, their emergence initiated an important transformation in the historical development of Japanese animation. These films creatively blurred the line between usage of full animation and limited animation; expressing interest in experimenting with various styles and techniques; incorporating elements from manga, fine art and popular culture, illustrating its modernity.

Although great attention has long been paid to Tezuka Osamu’s manga, it remains a problem that most discussions on Tezuka and Mushi Pro focused on their television animated series such as *Tetsuwan Atomu*, while overlooking the feature-length works, as well as their other experimental animated films. Nonetheless, Tezuka’s early television series are important as they became the foundation of later anime, a distinct mode of animation that is still growing in popularity today. It is unfortunate that discussions of his animations had been written at an introductory level and usually reveal mixed feelings towards Tezuka. Some apotheosized him as the “father of anime”, while others criticized him for being responsible for the visual expression of today’s anime, which are said to depend heavily on dialogues with little motion. In this context, it is not my intention to engage a full consideration of these controversies over the legacy of Tezuka and Mushi Pro. Instead, I will be examining how limited animation, simplified forms, icons, static formulas, the borrowing codes and conventions from manga that Mushi Pro had developed for their earlier television animated programs in the 1960s (such as


Tetsuwan Atomu, Janguru Taitei, Dororo and etc) were further developed as effective means to provide more mature expressions and meanings in these theatrical animated films.

This paper considers the importance of limited animation through the reevaluation of Mushi Pro's three adult-oriented works, in order to understand why this particular simplified look and expression have become the preferred choice for most anime and contemporary artists. Due to space constraints, this paper will only focus on demonstrating various potentials of limited animation starting with the emergence of Mushi Pro, followed by a visual analysis of their three adult-oriented films; a discussion of the key aspects of these three films and conclusion.

I. The Toei context for the emergence of Mushi Pro

Tezuka's first real experience in making animated film was through his involvement in Toei's third feature-length production, 

*Journey to the West* (aka *Alakazan the Great, Saiyūki* 1960). According to his own account, this experience triggered a deep unhappiness on the loss of individual animators' personal styles when working in large group projects that incorporate many talents. Nevertheless, making his first animation with Toei developed his skills and increased his interest in making animated films leading to the formation of his own production company in 1961. Tezuka's intention was to gather a group of artists to produce independent animated films. A year later, they produced their first work, *Tales of the Street Corner* (1962), an interesting short that creatively integrated a low number of cels with stunning images. Although it received some major prizes, it was too expensive to produce on Tezuka's manga income that was their main source of revenue. Their initial idealism gave way under economic pressure, and they started making profit-oriented productions. As a result, Mushi Pro became
fully involved in producing animated series for television from 1963 onwards. Before creating any of their feature-length animated films, they produced television animated series such as the 193 episodes of *Tetsuwan Atomu*. Their television programs reached the peak of popularity with the 52 episodes of *Janguru Taitei* and 52 episodes of *Ribon no Kishi*.

Another major influence was the emergence of many monthly manga anthology magazines that centered on a youthful audience. As a manga artist, Tezuka was well aware of the ongoing manga trends of early 1960s. These alternative manga later influenced the establishment of *COM* magazine, another experimental magazine, led by Tezuka. These manga encouraged the development of intense depictions of adult themes in Tezuka’s own manga in the late 1960s. For instance *Rally Up Mankind!* (*Ningen domo atsumare*, January 25, 1967 to July 24, 1968) appeared serially in *Weekly Manga Sunday; IL* (August 10, 1969 to March 25, 1970) in *Big Comic*.

The popularity of the experimental animation movement headed by Kuri Yoji, Yanagihara Ryohei and Manabe Hiroshi with the Sogetsu Art Center, and *gekiga* dealing with darker human dramas, stimulated Tezuka to reconsider the themes, styles and techniques found in the orthodox model of animation represented by Toei Animation, a studio that intended to become the “Disney of the Orient” (Yamaguchi 66). Tezuka’s attempt was supported by his young, ambitious staff, who were involved in making manga and wished to explore the possibilities of expression in animated films. They called themselves auteurs and treated animated film as an avant-garde form for expressing new imagery and ideas. Even though most of them were former Toei Animation employees, they were still considered amateurs in the industry. Together with Tezuka, they produced eight remarkable shorts and eight television animated series from 1960 to 1968. These shorts were full of varied themes and unconventional approaches that were not meant for children as they
contained uncompromisingly critical thoughts about war, stereotypes, and the pathos of human behavior and so on. Besides employing images that vividly mimic reality, they also used highly simplified abstract drawings where a few sketchy lines represented different characters and background. Alternative approaches such as mixing drawings with collage, were also used. All these events foreshadowed the introduction of animated films for adults.

The new attitudes towards sex and sexual imagery that arose in Japan during the late 1960s coincided with the proposal by Nippon Herald, a company specializing in distributing foreign movies in Japan, to have Mushi Pro produce feature-length animated films for adults. This cooperation was to expand the boundaries of Japanese animation. Until then, animation was virtually synonymous with children’s entertainment, and it was inconceivable that it could be marketed as an entertainment medium for adults. The adult animation created by Mushi Pro played an important role in pioneering the development of animation for adults in years to follow.

Mushi Pro introduced these three animated films as “animerama”, a term inspired by “Cinerama”, a wide screen projection format that was in fashion in Japan at that time. This new term emphasized the application of comparatively complex narrative structures and dramatic elements to animated films. The level of jokes, images and dialogue was more sophisticated as it was aimed at a more mature audience with adult experiences. This contrasted with the usual expectations that restricted animated films to simplified storylines delivered in a cheerful, straightforward manner. Additional innovative aspects included miniature models from live-action clips for buildings and landscape shots, the combination of live-action footage and animated images, and the use of a multiplane camera to create three dimensional effects. Mushi Pro highlighted these aspects as a new process intended to promote more advanced notions in animated films. In order to attract more attention and gain a wider audience,
these animated films were advertised as full of daring, sexy imagery. In brief, these three animated films are significant on two levels. They were the first efforts to introduce commercially the “adult genre” into the animated film industry. Secondly, the unusual manner of animation, a mixture of styles and techniques were innovative efforts that remain remarkable even today.

II. The Episodic Approach of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969)

*One Thousand and One Nights* is a loose adaptation of *Arabian Nights* which focuses on Aldin’s adventures. The narrative outlines Aldin’s romance with a slave girl whom he had kidnapped, his encounter with the forty thieves and their treasures, his stumbling onto a mysterious island where snakes disguised as beautiful women, an encounter with a genie offering him boundless wealth, falling in love with a girl whom he later discovers is his own daughter and so on.

The review in *Mainichi Daily News* indicated that “this film is so different from other animated cartoons that viewers are at first frustrated by the strange style. But, as the story develops, one becomes less and less annoyed, until finally, being completely drawn into the fantastic world of this animated cartoon.”

One of the startling aspects of this film is its innovative yet economical manner of animating imagery. For instance, when Aldin first arrived in the marketplace in Baghdad, instead of fully animating his gestures and surroundings, Aldin’s foot movements are selectively illustrated and superimposed onto several still illustrations of the marketplace. The sense of motion is enhanced through the fast cutting of these illustrations and the liveliness of the surroundings is created through the ambience of a busy market in the background painting. The problem of unchanged repetitive foot movement is
covered by employing still illustrations with eye-catching bright colors such as unpredictable reds, pinks, yellows, blues and greens to divert the audience’s attention. A sense of distance is suggested through the sound design. Even though the animation of Aldin’s foot remains in the same circle of movement, the changing sense of time and space is suggested through the change in background illustrations.

Chase scenes are common convention in classic animation. Tezuka employed a different approach in presenting this, as in the scene where Aldin takes advantage of a whirlwind and kidnaps Milliam. The scene starts with a standard formula where gun shots are exchanged between Aldin who is trying to seize Milliam from Hubbaslum. Audience familiar with this type of situation can imagine people screaming and crashing sounds as is typical in such chaotic scenes. Even though these standard motifs of chaos are used to a certain degree, they are not over-emphasized. There are two important visual expressions here. First, the chase scene is depicted from a long shot bird’s eye view perspective. We get an overall view from above the market, packed with characters. The protagonist and antagonist are shown as being the same size as the rest of the crowd. This design where the main characters are imbedded in the crowd often appeared in Tezuka’s manga, and is considered one of his visual signatures. This borrowed expression adds a new treatment to chase scenes. Secondly, the zoom shot of Aldin holding Milliam is seen through a peephole size circle against a black background. Within the same shot, a cut-out of Hubbaslum appears beside Aldin and Milliam. Here, the background of the chase scenes is completely removed and the distance between these two parties is compressed into a single shot. Instead of cutting from one shot to another, this compression utilizes the change within a shot (adding or removing). In this context, a technique common to short animated films has become part of feature-length animated films.
The depiction of an imaginary state through insertion of elements foreign to the conventional setting of the scene is another common feature of this film. These unusual elements can be found in the foreground or background of the frame, effectively reflecting the inner thoughts of the characters or simply a visual commentary by the animator. The scene where Aldin and Milliam take shelter at a deserted house after their temporary escape is a visually stunning example. Their passionate night starts with a typical love scene as they hold each other closely while kissing. This shot is replaced by an image of a burning candle against a white background as they both fall into bed. Thus far, it has been an ordinary love scene. Yet, when the viewpoint tilts down from the candle, we see an illusionary glimpse of a bed of roses under the candle stand. These roses could be a clichéd metaphorical representation of Milliam. In the following three-hundred-sixty-degree turn of the viewpoint of them kissing on the bed, Milliam’s image is rendered in a variety of graphics influenced by contemporary San Francisco rock music posters from the late 1960s. The rotation of the viewpoint and change in lighting signifies the emotional state of Milliam exposing her inner sexual excitement outwardly. This vision is immediately followed by an image of a rose opening up at high speed. The viewpoint dives into this blooming rose until it reaches the interior. This inner movement continues as though the camera is passing a tunnel as it explores the world inside a rose. The viewpoint keeps moving through many fine lines with organic qualities drawn against a psychedelic red background representing the exterior petals of the rose until it enters a black hole and is engulfed by darkness. After a brief interval, the darkness is replaced by an overview of Aldin and Milliam on a flying carpet soaring through the sky above a rose garden before disappearing into the edge of the frame. The journey through the rose “tunnel” can be interpreted as a clichéd view of sexual intercourse between Aldin and Milliam, yet, the subtle metamorphosis of lines, the
Silky motion and psychedelic colors all contribute to the stimulating organic quality of this love scene. The combination of still and animated imagery, the mixture of various styles and camera techniques which was more commonly found in the experimental animated films was skillfully applied here.

One of the most erotic sequences is on the island where flirtation transforms into an “orgy” between Aldin and the snake women. The women appear to represent various races as shown by their distinctive hair types and skin colors and they are all naked with beautiful figures. As the only man there, Aldin is treated like a king choosing any woman he desires. The dreamlike environment of the island employs literal to highly abstract nude forms of men and women. In one scene, Aldin is taken to a shower at a pool shaped like a female figure. The shower head is like a “woman’s nipple” and the “legs” serve as a kind of controller whereby spreading the legs allows the water to drain. The garden has trees shaped like female figures displaying various erotic positions. Each tree bears many heart-shaped “fruits” (the shapes resembling women’s buttocks or male testicles) that provide Aldin with endless energy to flirt with the snake women. A highly abstract style was used in the metamorphosis section that depicts the sexual union of Aldin with the Queen. The scene starts with a pencil sketch of a woman’s body against a pinkish background. The body constantly changes its form fluidly. This metamorphosis is breathtaking and the lines move freely as if having lives of their own. At times, the image looks like the motions of intercourse, yet subsequently, they split into images of hands holding each other. Sugii Gisaburo, who was responsible for the design and drawing of this section, comments that it seems boring if one simply visualizes a sex scene as it is.\(^1\) Therefore, they tried making use of motion to demonstrate inner feeling and emotion instead of just transforming an actual image into an animated image. In this scene, pencil sketches were drawn on paper instead of cels. Colors were
added with filters during the shooting as Sugii hoped to provide an unusual visual experience.

There are various experimental efforts in this film. One example uses photos of miniature models combined with animated images. Others include miniature models to provide an impressive three dimensional overview of Baghdad, as well as aerial scenes of the Tower of Babel. Although tremendous efforts were taken to build these miniatures, the visual effect was not so successful. From today’s viewpoint, these models look naively artificial. The sketches of the buildings are more interesting even though they are comparatively less sophisticated. The key problem is the suggestion of realism through these model settings. Most of the stunning visual effects are those that do not involve lifelike depiction. In these scenes, the audience is impressed with the imagination of the animators. Therefore, this is the key strength of Mushi Pro.

The Mushi staff introduced many innovative ideas, developed from their television animated series experience, into *One Thousand and One Nights*. Among the most intriguing aspect is the varied ways of employing simplified motion which gives a distinctive stylish look to this film that was different from that of Disney and Toei studios. Their work attempted to expand the boundaries of animation technique, theme and audience. This film demonstrates the uses of what is commonly known as “limited animation techniques” are actually not “limiting” but enriching, and achieved certain effects which cannot be done in live-action. Their involvement with the selective use of animated images along with an interest in experimenting with representational modes was further developed in their subsequent two films.

III. Popular Culture and Parody in *Cleopatra* (1971)

The second production, *Cleopatra*, is set in the near future when
Earth is in danger of invasion. When Earth Federation discovers enemy aliens using the code name “Cleopatra Project” as a weapon, they send three personnel back in time to ancient Egypt to ascertain the meaning of the code. Their spirits are separately transferred into one of Caesar’s slaves, an ordinary girl in Alexandria and the pet leopard of Cleopatra. These characters revolve around Cleopatra witnessing her undergoing a comically extreme form of surgery intending to becoming an irresistibly beautiful woman in order to seduce Caesar and defeat Rome.

One of the characteristics in *Cleopatra* is the appearance of popular characters from manga and TV animated series of that time. This includes *Nyarome*, a character from *Osomatsu-kun* and the father character from *Tensai Bakabon* by Akatsuka Fujio, a renowned gag comic artist; *Sazaesan* by Hasegawa Machiko, one of the first female manga artists; the ninja from *Kamui-den* by Shirato Sanpei, *Obake no Qtaro* by Fujiko Fujio; *Hige Godzilla*, a character from *Harenchi Gakuen* by Go Nagai; *Zeni Geba* by George Akiyama. A few of Tezuka’s famous characters such as *Tetsuwan Atomu* and *Higeoyaji* are also included.

The film is also full of parodies of contemporary TV variety shows, commercials and “talents”. For instance, some popular phrases that appeared in *Geba Geba kyujyupun* are repeated in *Cleopatra*. Yet, viewed today, it is rather difficult to understand and appreciate the parody without sharing the same frame of reference. Unless they refer to some sort of universal understanding or worldwide noted incident, the appeal of these topical comic gags have expired over time.

Beyond the Japanese pop culture references, there is an exceptional parody involving visual puns of famous paintings as Caesar brings Cleopatra back to Rome. Here, we see animated versions of *Cancan Dancers* by Toulouse-Lautrec, *Ballet Dancer* by Degas, *Liberty Leading the People* by Delacroix, as well as works by Munch,
Modigliani and other western artists.

Mushi Pro also borrowed some standard cartoonish transformation of objects. For example, the sea battle scenes where the personification of two opponent ships being attracted to each other, while people onboard are still at war. Another example, the scene where the leopard Rupa is hit by Apollodoria because of his lecherous attitude towards Cleopatra. Rupa is beaten so strongly that his black spots drop off and he has to pick them up and glue them back on.

One of the visual experiments favored by Mushi Pro was mixing live-action footage with animated images. Unlike the first film where they tried mixing animated images with miniatures, here they tried to synthesize animated images with live-action footage. In the opening sequence, the characters’ heads and body outlines are animated, while the bodies themselves and backgrounds are presented in live-action. This interesting visual treatment is not used to add meaning to the narrative or character development, but is consistent with the cartoon-like character of the work which amuses through constantly shifting visual innovation without having deeper meanings.

Colors are effectively used in Cleopatra. Continuing the visual approach of the previous film, characters in Cleopatra are distinguished by different colors. Ionius has pinkish skin and yellow hair; Caesar is portrayed with greenish skin and light grey hair; while Octavian has blue-grey skin and brunet hair. In some of the crowd scenes, people are depicted with rough lines, without color, and placed against a background with different tones of a single color. These colors are not standardized and change in each scene, becoming an important visual element in creating the desired mood. In later battle and outdoor scenes, the background detail is replaced with a simple yet elegant watercolor treatment of the sky or simply an open background without any object.

Most erotic scenes in both these films were created by Sugii Gisaburo, who was the character designer for both animations. The
drawing style and metamorphosis of lines in the love scene between Caesar and Cleopatra are quite similar to that of the passionate night of Aldin and Milliam though less exciting. Here, instead of penciling lines, pen was used against a white background, somewhat involving less metamorphosis between drawings. The abstraction of these sequences remains important as the depiction of naked bodies in both contexts is different from the conventional drawing of “sexy” women seen in animation and manga. These scenes attempt to convey a realm of sexual excitement through bodies that dissolved completely into abstract lines rather than the standard cliché depictions of sexually attractive figures.

Another erotic moment with similar key idea is that of Caesar and Cleopatra in a roman bathing scene. Here, the usual outlines of the figure are omitted to increase the dreamlike effect of a bathing Cleopatra. Interestingly, the water falling into the tub like rain at times resembles Cleopatra’s tears. Unlike other typical erotic sequences that use visual simulation of direct sexual act or exposure of naked bodies, the handling of this sequence is more complex and sensitive in its depiction of the character’s inner emotion. The removal of the outline of the character increases the sensuality of Cleopatra’s naked body that becomes “light” and “floating”. When Caesar joins her in the bath, their sexual activity is hinted. Only a portion of Cleopatra’s body is shown with some suggestive allusion of movement. The contrast of the soft curvilinear profile of Cleopatra with the hard and straight lines used in depicting her surroundings (including the falling water) suggests her complicated situation; making love to Caesar whom she intends to poison right after this bath. Again, the Mushi staff skilfully moved beyond conventional depictions of eroticism.

In another section, a detailed painting of two women’s bodies intertwined together appears. One is bending down head rested between the legs of the other woman, who is half-sitted. This still
image, similar to symmetrical imagery in a Rorschach test, rotates vertically and horizontally. At one time, only portions of the drawing are shown. The Cleopatra’s voice is added to this constantly rolling image after a few silent moments. We hear her sobbing weakly her desire to be like any other ordinary woman. She has suffered enough seducing Caesar and Antonius, falling in love with them only to witness their deaths. While the image remains the same, Apollodoria’s voice cuts in, reminding Cleopatra that it is for the sake of Egypt and as long as the Roman invasion continues, she has no choice but to perform her duty. This sequence ends by cutting back to the animated image of a naked Cleopatra and Apollodoria arguing, directly pinpointing their sexual relationship for the first time. The sense of sexuality is suggested through the mechanical rotation of the painting. Both their images merge or separate depending on the irregular pattern of rotation. Even though there is no actual animated motion of sexual acts between them, the rotation and camera work effectively create a fluid feeling of sexual action.

The film is separated into sections loosely based upon the relationships of some of its main characters; Cleopatra and Caesar, Cleopatra and Antonius, Apollodoria and Cleopatra, Lybia and Ionius and so on. These sections are differentiated by their diverse visual styles. The continual changes of the style produce dramatic changes in mood between scenes and sometimes between shots. An erotic sequence has Apollodoria and her secret anti-Roman group weakening the soldiers by seducing them with so-called “female power”. Different from other scenes, Tezuka’s visual treatment for this section is energetic, stylish and funky. Accompanying Rokumonsen’s lively music score, characters drawn with rough outlines are placed against a simple background. Often the characters are not colored, their outlines creating an interesting transparent and ghostly effect. The imagery is comparatively comedic, expressionist and cheerful.
Other experimental approaches include manga–like imagery. In a scene where Cleopatra, Lydia and Ionius head for the Pyramid in a sandstorm, there is hardly any motion besides the movement of the characters’ mouths. Instead of the usual voice track synchronized with movement, a few dialogue bubbles constantly fade in and out to convey their conversation. The bubbles interestingly blend the comic convention into animation, exposing the material structure of the medium. Other distinctive comic expressions located throughout the film include the application of speed lines in action sequences. These neatly ruled lines applied to the limbs of the characters emphasize motion and abstract background patterns indicating the inner state of the character or as a visual comment by the animator.

These manga–like expressions are one of the distinctive aspects of Cleopatra. In this context, it is important to recognize that the use of manga expressions can be considered a pioneering effort by Mushi Pro. No doubt the manga background of Tezuka and his staff and the “training” from their production for television played an important role in sharpening these skills. However, the sensitivity of the staff to the various possibilities contained in employing expressions and ideas found in manga is even more significant. The many references and parodies to contemporary popular culture and art reveal their interest in giving Cleopatra a sense of being in tune with youth culture. Even though Tezuka and some of the critics felt that Cleopatra was not a successful production as many of the topical parodies and comments faded over time, it is still inspiring to see how these creators attempted to go beyond the boundaries of animation of their time.

IV. The Unified Approach of Belladonna (1973)

The third work, Belladonna, is a free adaptation of Jules Michelet’s La Sorcière about a young woman, Joan, who is treated brutally in a repressive medieval society. She is raped by the feudal lord and his
men on her wedding night. In her defenseless state, she is gradually driven to the devil, and gains power by bargaining her body and soul to him. Later, the feudal lord appoints her husband as a tax collector but his arm is eventually amputated due to his failure to extract enough taxes from the villagers, and Joan is driven away from the village because she is accused of witchcraft. Although she helped cure the villagers of plague, Joan is burned at the stake in the sad ending of the film.

*Belladonna*, following the considerable success of the previous two films, was proposed by Nippon Herald to Mushi Pro to be directed by Yamamoto Eiichi alone. The overall style of the production was still adult-oriented but there was an intention to achieve a more artistic expression. In other words, it was intended as an art house movie. The intended target was Hibiya Miyuki, an art theater that screened works of Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman and George Dunning’s *Yellow Submarine* (1968). Unfortunately, in the end, *Belladonna* was screened at a movie theater that focused on action movies. Even though *Belladonna* was often prejudged and overlooked due to its erotic content, it remains a visually stunning work well worth detailed discussion.

A literary quality and avant-garde approach that blended artistic erotic expression with a more serious storyline is the defining feature of *Belladonna*. Although eroticism was still employed to attract audience, this approach clearly differentiated *Belladonna* from the previous two works. The diverse comic gags of the earlier works are replaced by an intense and consistent mood, and drawing style. Moving the camera over still images to create an illusion of motion and consciously selecting certain elements to animate define the method of presentation in *Belladonna*. In an interview, Yamamoto emphasizes that he avoided animating routine motions of everyday life. He compares this to *Bunraku*, a form of traditional Japanese puppet theatre, where stillness and slow motion are widely used to
effectively convey emotion and meaning. Yamamoto considers that the audience can fill in the blanks by themselves. It is more interesting for him to visualize the inner feeling while presenting customary motions and images in an unusual way. Sugii Gisaburo, animator director of *Belladonna* agrees with Yamamoto. Sugii comments in the same interview that even though he is a big fan of Disney, he is unsure that constantly moving objects is the only method for animation. As a result, throughout *Belladonna*, the selected animated images fully contrast with the still elements in the sequence, creating a stimulating and occasionally bizarre visual effect.

A good example is where Joan comes home in the morning after being sexually assaulted by the feudal lord and his servants. She stands by the door weak and embarrassed with a thin stream of blood flowing down between her legs. This is followed by a few montage shots of Joan and her husband Jean as they sit silently, hugging each other tightly. In contrast to these quiet images, we hear Joan crying out in pain on the audio track. This combination of silent images versus an anguished voice creates an unusual, yet interesting viewing experience. Another example is the eye-popping oil painting sequence by Hayashi Seiichi (b. 1945). In a conversation scene between Joan and the devil, Joan is shown uneasy with her own appearance, stressing that she has been fooled and is heading towards hell. This serious discussion is accompanied by soft strokes of color on a whitish background. Shapes and forms start forming from these irregular strokes. Parts of the drawing are constantly dissolving and being replaced by new elements.

It is interesting that Sugii Gisaburo and Yamamoto Eiichi always talk about their interest in fine art artists and incorporating such ideas into animation. In *Belladonna*, Yamamoto says that they are conscious about the style of Gustav Klimt and mannerism. Additionally, the sequences handled by Kodama Takao also have the influences from contemporary pop art and poster designs by Peter
Max. Their sensitivity to other art forms and attempts to incorporate such ideas into their works are rare for feature–length theatrically released animated films.

Although *Belladonna* continues to develop limited animation and references to popular culture as employed in the first two films, it is distinctly different in its attempt to develop a serious narrative with a more unified and consistent aesthetics. This sense of seriousness is imparted by the quiet, emotional atmosphere and slow pace of animating that is different from the hectic comic transitions of the earlier works. The sense of motion developed from still images gradually gains power until it creates a breathtaking vision of this despairing narrative. Although continuing to emphasize erotic elements, Mushi Pro tried to move beyond zany humor and parody towards a serious melodrama in their attempt to expand the possibilities of adult animation. This is perhaps the least well known of the three works but it remains the most ambitious and was way ahead of its time.

V. **Key Aspects of Mushi Pro’s Feature–Length Animation**

People often tend to associate these “adult–oriented” animated films with low class obscene materials and overlooking their creativity. Even though these three works employ sexual and erotic depictions, most of these scenes do not directly portray sexual acts unlike the explicit anime that are so common today. The visual emphasis is placed on the expression of desire through metaphor, metamorphosis of line and color, and various manipulations of camera and editing 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. Furthermore, many of these scenes are animated with the rhythms and motions of sexual acts. Overall, the renditions of nude forms
range from literal to highly abstract. All these erotic and visually stunning sequences play a central role in the narrative and character development rather than simply inserted for pornographic effect. In an interview with the co-director of these three works, Yamamoto Eiichi states that the sexual elements were meant to be one of the key features of these works, with the hope of featuring a broader diversity of adult themes in subsequent productions. The production team gave greater emphasis to literary and poetic elements especially with Belladonna. However, as there were no projects after Belladonna, this erotic tone has often been regarded as the focal point of the three animations.

Another distinct aspect is the relation between the application of style and techniques to the narrative of these films. All these films were structured differently. One Thousand and One Nights was composed playfully, aligned to the episodic character of the original narrative, an irregular collection of tales loosely tied together. Thus the elements of fantasy, eroticism, jealousy, adventure, dream and desire are perfect basis for Mushi Pro to create a carnivalesque feel for the animation. The variety implicit in this structure allowed the execution of different styles and techniques, as it was intended to amuse, surprise and sustain interest. Not only was it unnecessary to be consistent from beginning till end, in fact, such consistency would have limited their free exploration of animation techniques.

An actual historical context with a long literary tradition was mixed with an element of science fiction in Cleopatra. Although there are still evidence of experimentation with style and technique as with the first work, it is less episodic in structure and more coherent in its overall visual presentation. The way Mushi staff played against the known history, creating parodies of well-known historical events, satirizing Cleopatra’s beauty via plastic surgery or playfully distorting world famous oil paintings is quite astonishing. Again, these excitements are celebrated in a carnival-like context that
fluidly moves through a great variety of images and techniques. In short, *Cleopatra* is similar to *One Thousand and One Nights* as these stylistic approaches end up standing apart from the central concerns of the narrative, unable to provide a deeper meaning and reading of the text. The audience was intended to be fascinated with the look of these films rather than to feel sympathy or make emotional identification with the characters. This type of depiction is representative of many orthodox cartoons, where satisfaction comes from enjoying the progressive excitement from moment to moment. At one level, this separation from the main narrative serves to liberate the animation from the constraints of the largely conventional plot and character resulting in passages of animated whimsy that form the creative aspect of these works. On another level, it is important to recognize that this episodic construction is not accidental. As these two works were among the earlier efforts of the so-called theatrically released adult-oriented animated film, the erotic element is especially notable. Eroticism is often an effective tactic in ensuring sensational attraction. Even so, comedy and cartoonish expression were added to help reduce the embarrassment that an audience might feel watching an “adult-oriented” film on the big screen. Of course, this combination also allowed Mushi Pro to carry out their visual and technical experiments while safely avoiding censorship.

In *Belladonna*, the use of visual style and camera techniques became more self-conscious, constrained and consistent. There is less humor but the styles and techniques are now more coherent and amplified rather than ‘drift away’ from the construction of meaning in the film. Director Yamamoto Eiichi and art director Sugii Gisaburo’s interest is in animating abstract qualities and inner emotion while putting aside most of the routine movements that would ordinarily be animated. This approach successfully developed an unusual quiet atmosphere, a smooth and slow texture that draws the audience’s attention to the comparatively serious narrative about the
maltreatment and persecution of Belladonna’s central woman. The sense of stillness and slow rhythm were supported by visually stunning paintings that were drawn in great detail. This presentation challenges the audience to see an animated film with very few of the conventional codes of animation. Even though Joan is inevitably featured in sexual scenes like other female characters in previous films, the context is taken more seriously. She is placed in La Sorcière, a novel loosely based upon a grim historical period, indirectly questioning the extended meaning of the film in its contemporary socio-political context. The festival atmosphere found in previous works is replaced by a consistent narrative that requires critical interpretation of the situation of women and their sexuality, thereby exceeding the stereotyped understanding of animation. All these qualities made it ahead of its time and even today, Belladonna remains the least known among these three works. While these animations did not fully manage to develop the larger potential of “adult-oriented” animated film, Mushi Pro’s aspiration in using animation as an entertainment medium for adult audiences was advanced for that period, especially their attempt to move towards more serious issues presented in ambitious artistic avant-garde manner.

VI. Conclusion

In 1973, Mushi Pro faced bankruptcy due to ineffective management. Tezuka shouldered the huge debt and deferred his dreams and passion for animation. He disappeared from the animation arena for five years but returned in 1978 with One Million Year Trip : Bander Book, the first two-hour animated TV film, for a special screening for the 25th anniversary of Nippon Television on the theme “Love Saves the Earth”. He continued to produce feature-length animated films for television specials, releasing his theatrical animation Phoenix 2772 (Space Firebird) in 1980. During that period,
Tezuka was also involved in producing and directing a few relatively experimental short animations, especially *The Green Cat* (1983) and *The Rain Boy* (1983) from his manga series, *Lion Books*. At this stage, even though Tezuka continued to explore animation language, especially the elements of metamorphosis, his animations were gradually moving towards environmental themes while becoming more conventional in terms of visual presentation. Although Tezuka’s early ambition to form a platform for artists was unsuccessful, these three animations proved to be important in their exploration of innovative possibilities for artistic expression both in Tezuka’s work, as well as in the historical development of Japanese animated film.

Tezuka has always been credited as the pioneer of the first television animation series in both monochrome and color, producing feature-length animations for television specials and so on. Even so, he is still blamed for undercutting the production cost of television animation, and criticized for initiating “limited animation techniques” that are still popular and have profoundly influenced television animation series even today. Undoubtedly, some of these techniques have been conventionalized and become clichéd visual expressions. Today, these techniques of limited animation are often treated as mere shortcuts forced upon directors by budgetary constraints, as critics fail to recognize its potential. Full animation tends to reproduce imagery and movement of life-like quality, while limited animation can be an effective technique to convey inner ideas and emotions. It is true that limited animation is often used in order to save time and expenses from creating a more impressive smooth motion. However, limited animation can portray the meaning at the core of the action which need not be shown through movement. Moreover, these works revealed the possibility of employing comparatively advanced or “experimental” expressions in theatrically released animation, which need not be filled with “realistic” detail and
movement to attract an audience.

The combination of limited and full animation techniques found in these three works was a pioneering effort and some aspects remain remarkable even today. The possibilities for further developing the skillful combination of full animation and limited animation techniques were demonstrated later in works such as Oshii Mamoru’s *Angel’s Egg* (1985), wherein visually stunning imagery by Amano Yoshitaka supports a loose narrative merging dreams and reality. Even though this work by Oshii has been criticized for its weak narrative structure, it displays positive qualities and unusual possibilities for expression in animation.

In the development of post-war animation in Japan, there was a growing division between those who viewed the future of animation as focusing on production of ever more smoothly animated motion and realistic detail, as opposed to an emphasis on aesthetics and the inventiveness of unconventional imagery. The critical response to these three animations tended to discredit Tezuka’s approach in favor of the application of smoothly animated motion as found in Disney productions. Even today, so called “limited animation” continues to be the standard for television animated films and most theatrical releases. Tezuka’s exploration of new techniques in these early adult-oriented films remains an important example of the potential of anime to be complex, artistic and imaginative. Additionally, these works by Mushi Pro established sexuality and eroticism as possible themes for adult animation. Despite the great amount of sexually themed animations, few have been able to achieve either the humor of the first two films or the serious intent of *Belladonna*. In this regard, these three works are still ahead of their time.
A Reevaluation of the Importance of Mushi Pro’s Three Adult–Oriented Animated Films in the Development of Japanese Animation

Notes

1. *Apple Pie* and *Birdcalls* are the prize winners in the International Animation Festival Hiroshima 2006. The *Cowboys* series was screened in the special screening at the same festival.

2. Even though these three works were recognized as the first theatrical length adult–oriented animated films in Japan, note that there were a number of shorts and medium length animated films that already displayed certain distinctive adult–oriented characteristics even before the war. Examples include works by famous animator, Ofuji Noburo (1900–1961). Experimental animation movement by *Sogetsu* in the 1960s, represented by Kuri Yoji (b. 1928). Although these works were well known among animators, they were mainly shorts and mostly screened in film festivals or private screenings with no commercial distribution network, and most of them have remained unknown to the general public.

3. Mushi “Pro” is the standard abbreviation used in Japanese for “Mushi Productions”. Mushi Pro was formed by Tezuka in 1961.


5. The term “limited animation” is a rather obscure one. Tezuka widely spread the use of the term. Back in 1960s, it is believed he “developed” a set of simplified movements for use in their TV animated series, *Tetsuwan Atomu* in order to cut production cost. In the 1970s and 1980s, the use of the term “limited animation techniques” disappeared and was replaced by “anime”, yet, the style of visual presentation is an extension of this earlier mode. The most representative of this particular type of visual presentation was pioneered by United Productions of America (UPA) from 1945 to 1953. For an overview see Michael Barrier (2003) Amid Amidi (2006) and Paul Wells (2002 : 136).

6. These experimental shorts were released into DVD in 2003 as *Tezuka Osamu jikken animeeshon sakuhinshu – Osamu Tezuka Film Works*, as part of the DVDs series of Tezuka Osamu Animation World.

7. ‘Boku no jinsei gekijyo’ (My Theatrical Life) by Tezuka Osamu. A serial essay originally found in *Tokyo Shimbun* from October 31st to November

8. COM is the abbreviation for Comic, Companion and Communication. Tezuka intended to make this a platform for young manga artists. It ran from 1963 to 1971.

9. The Sogetsu group of artists, active in many fields, was led by Teshigahara Hiroshi (1927–2001) in the late 1960s and was one of the earliest efforts to promote experimental animation.


11. An interview conducted by Oguro Yuichiro with Sugii Gisaburo on 3 February 2004. Published online at Web Animation Magazine entitle Animerama sanbu saku wo kenkyū shiyo (Let’s Research the Animerama Trilogy).


13. A folk music group formed from 1968 to 1972, lead by Komuro Hitoshi (b 1943).


15. Sugii Gisaburo mentioned the work of Alberto Giacometti and Paul Klee in his interview (refer to footnote 11) and possible influences from them.


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**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Kato Mikiro and Paul Berry for their very helpful comments. In addition, I would like to especially thank Watanabe Yashushi for sharing many rare materials about Tezuka Osamu and Mushi Pro from his collection and encouraging my research.