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ANIME

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from Akira to
Princess Mononoke

Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation

Susan J. Napier

palgrave

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a paradoxical sexual subtext in its implicit problematization of sexual and gender boundary-crossings. The *mecha* genre also contains aspects of the occult and the gothic as well, as can be seen in *Ghost in the Shell* and *Evangelion*. Furthermore, all of the works discussed participate in the modes of apocalypse, festival, and elegy, with occult pornography sometimes participating in all three modes at the same time. Perhaps most important, because of their literally "fantastic" settings and imagery that allow visual imagination free rein, these genres contain some of the most memorable explorations of the body and identity available in animation.

CHAPTER THREE

AKIRA AND RAMMA 1/2: THE MONSTROUS ADOLESCENT

AKIRA: REVENGE OF THE ABJECTED

One of the major changes in the representation of the monstrous is that it has been increasingly represented as coming from within.

—Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*

DESPAIR AND A FEELING OF ENTRAPMENT are emotions often associated with adolescence. They are also frequently emotions projected onto the adolescent body, an object that becomes the site of a welter of contradictory feelings, from tremulous hope to savage disappointment.

ment. This chapter discusses two forms of the representation of the adolescent body in Japanese animation, the confused and terrifying figure of Tetsuo in Otomo Katsuhiro's 1988 tour de force *Akira* and the confused and comic figure of Ranma in the popular late 1980s and early 1990s television series *Ranma 1/2*. Although very different from each other in style and tone, both texts privilege the notion of the adolescent body as a site of metamorphosis, a metamorphosis that can appear monstrous both to the figure undergoing it and to the outside world. What makes the two works fundamentally different, however, is the protagonists' basic attitudes toward metamorphosis. In the case of Tetsuo, he sometimes resists the transformation but also at times nihilistically glories in it, and ultimately asserts his monstrous new identity unflinchingly at the film's end. Ranma's reaction to his transforming body is very different. He continually denies it, searching for a return to "normality" that is forever comically (but perhaps for him tragically) elusive.

Although each anime can and should be enjoyed for its own brilliance, they are also interesting as implicit comments on Japanese society. While Tetsuo's marginal status in *Akira* may at first seem far from the conventional view of Japan as a largely homogenous nation, his character actually evokes a less obvious but deeply significant side of Japanese national self-representation, that of the lonely outcast. As scholar Marie Morimoto describes this identity, "Dominant themes in Japanese cultural self-representation have long been those of uniqueness, isolation, and victimization—hence of a lone nation struggling against all odds."¹ *Akira* appeared in 1988, a time when Japan had reached what has perhaps been its postwar peak of international influence and (mis)recognition, a period when many nations felt threatened by what they saw as Japan's emerging superpower status.² Tetsuo's monstrousness can thus be coded in ideological terms as a reflection of Japan's own deep-seated ambivalence at this time, partly glorying in its new identity but also partly fearing it. In certain ways *Akira* opens up a space for the marginal and the different, suggesting in its ending a new form of identity.

It is fitting that we begin our discussion of anime texts with *Akira*, not only because it foregrounds some of the most important themes of this book, such as identity, body, apocalypse, and the festival, but also because it is one of the most famous anime ever made. *Akira* was

number one at the box office the year of its release in Japan, even beating out *Return of the Jedi*. Released in America and Europe the following year, it became both a critical and a cult hit and in many ways can be seen as the film that started the anime boom in the West. The film's adult themes of dystopia and apocalypse and its superbly detailed, viscerally exciting animated style amazed Western audiences.³ *Akira* was also a long-running manga series. Even though the film and manga contain some important differences, the two texts are alike in their edgy dark intensity, encapsulated in the film's anthemo, Tetsuo.

Within its visceral spectacle of human destruction, however, is a not-unfamiliar horror film trope of a youth who, made subject to sinister outside powers, is transformed into a monstrous creature, capable of doing great harm to others and to himself. In this case the youth, Tetsuo, is a member of a gang of down-and-out hot rodders (*bosozoku*) who cruise the streets of post-World War III Neo Tokyo looking for action. One of the weaker members of the gang, Tetsuo is initially only noticeable because of his friendship with the gang's leader, Kaneda. Reared together with Tetsuo in an orphanage, Kaneda has always come to the aid of his weaker friend, a situation that, it becomes clear later, has bred a contradictory mixture of dependence and resentment in Tetsuo. A revealing early scene shows Tetsuo attempting to jump-start Kaneda's enormous red motorcycle, only to be laughed at by his stronger comrade.

Film scholar Jon Lewis describes the motor cycle as "the phallic symbol of power and authority"⁴ in countless teen films, but, while this is true in *Akira* as well, the motorcycle is also an agent of change, a symbol of subversive flexibility against a monolithic and indifferent state. The vigorous but fluid movement of the motorcycles serves as a kinetically realized contrast with the unmoving structure of power and authority, represented by the enormous massed buildings that rise threateningly in the face of the bikers' charge. The emphasis on movement may also evoke a premodern group of marginals, the so-called *ronin* (literally "wave man"), masterless samurai who roamed Japan in the Edo period and who also worked outside the power structure.

Tetsuo's inability to control Kaneda's motorcycle underlines his weakness and dependence at the beginning of the film, but this soon changes. During a frenzied motorcycle ride Tetsuo encounters a

strange, wizened creature beside the enormous dark crater of what used to be "old Tokyo." The viewer later learns that the creature is a psychic child, one of a group of children who, as the result of government experiments with telekinesis, has been frozen into a kind of unnatural aged childhood, imprisoned by his powerful psychic energies. Tetsuo's encounter with the psychic mutant triggers his own immense telekinetic energies, and it is the saga of his growing powers, developing against a dystopian background of civil chaos, religious revivalism, and government oppression that forms the core of the film's narrative. Taken captive by government scientists who experiment on him in an attempt to further develop his powers, Tetsuo soon escapes, wreaking havoc everywhere as he flees across the city in search of "Akira" the entity rumored to be the most powerful of the group of child mutants. In the film's visually brilliant climax we see Tetsuo undergoing a series of mutations as he engages in an all out battle with his former friend Kaneda as well as with what appears to be virtually all of the Japanese Self Defense Force, which is called out to stop him. Ultimately, after going through a variety of increasingly disturbing metamorphoses and destroying much of Neo Tokyo, Tetsuo disappears, apparently taken away by "Akira" and the other psychic mutants.

The film resists closure, however. An ominous earlier episode shortly before his disappearance shows scientists analyzing Tetsuo's psychic patterns and discovering what might be a new universe forming out of them. As Tetsuo's former comrades begin to breathe a sigh of relief, therefore, we hear in voiceover the words, "It's begun." Tetsuo's former comrade Kaneda sees a radiant white dot come down from the sky and closes his hand on it, whispering, "Tetsuo." The film ends with the view of a human eye emitting a dazzling white radiance and a final voiceover, the words "I am Tetsuo."

Tetsuo's unhappy antiheroism represents a form of all-out adolescent resistance to an increasingly meaningless world in which oppressive authority figures administer the rules simply to continue in power. This bleak characterization clearly struck a chord in its Japanese audience. In fact, the brooding figure of Tetsuo became the inspiration behind the filmmaker Tsukamoto Shinya's two avant-garde science fiction films, *Tetsuo I* and *Tetsuo II*, both of which were essentially homages to a particularly dark form of body metamorphosis.

The film's dark subject matter also met with a favorable reception beyond the borders of Japan and it is a perennial favorite among Western viewers' "Top Ten Anime" lists. Clearly, the theme of stubborn adolescent resistance is one that resonates in many corners of global society as Ueno's anecdote concerning *Akira* in Sarajevo, quoted at the beginning of this book, richly illustrates. It should also be acknowledged that a large part of the film's appeal comes from what film critic Tony Rayns describes as "the sheer quality and vigor of the animation itself."⁵ It is this combination of brilliant animation with a fascinating, if not incredibly complex and bleak, narrative that has made the film so popular with both domestic and foreign audiences.

Focusing on one of the film's dominant themes, metamorphosis, *Akira* can be looked at on two levels: as a fresh expression of an alienated youth's search for identity and as a cyberpunk meditation on apocalypse. For now, the focus will be on a more personal form of destruction (and perhaps resurrection), what film scholar Peter Boss calls an "intimate apocalypse," the "sense of disaster being visited at the level of the body itself."⁶ This, in turn, is related to psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, in terms of separation from/identification with the maternal, as Tetsuo's disaster ridden body crosses gender boundaries to implode into a grotesque scene of birth.⁷

The film fits into a comparatively recently identified subset of the horror genre, a subgenre that has been identified as "Body Horror." As Kelly Hurley defines it:

"Body Horror" [is] a hybrid genre that recombines the narrative and cinematic conventions of the science fiction, horror, and suspense film in order to stage a spectacle of the human body defamiliarized, rendered other. Body horror seeks to inspire revulsion—and in its own way pleasure—through representations of quasi-human figures whose effect/affect is produced by their abjection, their ambiguation, their impossible embodiment of multiple, incompatible forms.⁸

Akira works remarkably well in this subgenre, for the film's last fifteen minutes or so contain an extraordinary vision of almost unwatchable excess as Tetsuo's mutations become increasingly grotesque. Although hideous, these metamorphoses are also truly spectacular (in the post-

modern sense of spectacle) leaving the viewer shaken by feelings of both horror and exhilaration. On a more traditional level, they can be seen as memorably emblemizing the crisis of the alienated adolescent, isolated, vengeful, frightened, and, at a deep level, monstrous both to himself and others.

The film's primary subtext is the tension between the two related but contradictory concepts of power and control (the English word "control"—or "kontoruru," as it is pronounced in Japanese—is used frequently throughout the film), concepts that have deep resonance for the adolescent developing from child to adult. At the beginning of the film the oppressive male adult authority structure of government, military, and the scientific establishment (not so different than contemporary Japan, although more extreme) wield all control. However, by *Akira's* end, we see the total diminishment of authority as, one by one, the representatives of the establishment admit that they can no longer control what is happening around them; this is seen especially in the body of Tetsuo, who they had hoped to use as an experimental guinea pig. While the power of authority diminishes, the young man's power grows, but even he is unable to control it in the end. Total bodily transmogrification into a form of Otherness hinted at in the film's ending is the final price Tetsuo has to pay. Before this occurs however, the viewer is treated to (or subjected to) an awesome spectacle of corporeal mutation that conforms well to Hurley's general description of what happens to the human subject in body horror: "The narrative told by body horror again and again is of a human subject dismantled and demolished; a human body whose integrity is violated, a human identity whose boundaries are breached from all sides."⁹

Tetsuo's metamorphosis is both a literal and a symbolic one: from ordinary human boy to monstrous creature to, perhaps, a new universe; in other words, from impotence to total power. Tetsuo's new powers may also symbolize his development from adolescent into adult, especially since at the film's end he is identified by language rather than image, thus suggesting his entry into the Symbolic order. However, this form of "adult" identity appears to be totally uncontrollable in its arrogation of power, not to mention wholly lacking in any spiritual or moral development.¹⁰

Furthermore the grotesque visual tour de force of the film's climactic scene casts doubt on any positive interpretation of Tetsuo's

newfound identity. These transformations begin with Tetsuo losing his arm in a laser attack by a government satellite.¹¹ Until this point Tetsuo mostly glories in his new powers and in his ability to destroy humans, buildings and anything else in his path, but the loss of his arm forces him to use his powers on himself. Clearly in enormous pain, Tetsuo telekinetically constructs a new arm, a hideous appendage consisting mainly of veinlike tentacles that grow increasingly longer and larger. Unable to stop the mutations of his arm, Tetsuo uses it to engulf the enigmatic military figure known as the Colonel, who has come to take him back to the government laboratory. The arm goes on to engulf Tetsuo's girlfriend Kaori and his friend Kaneda, although in the case of these two it is uncertain whether this is an attack or a cry for help.

This uncertainty is based on the fact that, as his mutations continue and begin to take over his whole body, Tetsuo's aspect changes from cocky self confidence ("I never knew I could have such power!" he exults at one point) to frenzied desperation. Totally defamiliarized from the wistful adolescent punk he used to be, Tetsuo transforms into a grotesque gigantic infant whose oozing pink flesh seems to overflow the screen. His newly infantile physical condition is matched by a return to his emotional dependency on Kaneda. Whereas previously he had triumphantly shouted his independence, crowing to Kaneda, "I don't need your help anymore," in these final scenes of metamorphosis, he cries out again to Kaneda as he had when they were children. Even Kaneda cannot save him, however. He is left alone to acknowledge for the first time his newfound identity in his final statement, "I am Tetsuo."

Tetsuo's transformations can be viewed as a particularly gruesome form of combined primal and birth scenes: The phallic tentacular arm that expands and contracts ultimately seems to lose itself into an oozing feminine pinkness, which in turn becomes a gigantic baby. This horrifying "birth scene" echoes cinema theorist Barbara Creed's statement that the act of birth is seen as grotesque "because the body's surface is no longer closed, smooth, and intact, rather it looks as if it may tear apart, open out, reveal its innermost depths."¹² This scene also seems to be a classic example of Kristeva's notion of abjection, in which the (male) infant finds the mother's body simultaneously horrifying and erotic. The abject is a state that

exists on the borderline of identity between mother and infant, and in order for the infant to attain subjectivity, it is necessary for him to abject the maternal. In Tetsuo's transformation there is, of course, no actual "mother" (significantly, *Akira* contains virtually no representations of a maternal figure or even of any adult female characters). Instead, the moist pink oozing mass that eventually becomes the infant can be seen as the as yet unabjected maternal within Tetsuo himself, an orphan who may at last be finding or perhaps "creating" his lost mother.¹³ Oozing across all the normal borders of identity, it is no wonder that Tetsuo's mutating form becomes an object of both horror and fascination. Given access to the secret depths of the body, and being allowed to see the transgressions of the body's boundaries, the viewer cannot quite look away.

The participation of the viewer is important here because, on one level, Tetsuo's transformation may be read in purely cinematic terms as a visual "frenzy of metamorphosis." Tetsuo's "eruptive body" (to borrow popular culture specialist Scott Bukatman's term)¹⁴ becomes an orgasmic spectacle of hideously transmogrifying body shapes that leave the viewer both repulsed but, on some level, perhaps, exhilarated, as the viewer loses him or herself into the overwhelming body catastrophe transpiring on the screen. As film scholar Philip Brophy says of the grotesque transformation scene in the American film *The Beast Within*, "[t]he horror is conveyed through torture and agony of havoc wrought upon a body devoid of control. The identification [by the viewer] is then leveled at that loss of control—the fictional body is as helpless as its viewing subject."¹⁵ This feeling of helplessness can be perversely pleasurable for the viewer who can enjoy the extremity of the spectacle from a safely detached distance.

But Tetsuo's story is not only a postmodern celebration of spectacle and boundary transgression. It needs also to be read as a deeply ambiguous rite of passage story. Tetsuo's outsider status, his rivalry with Kaneda, and his negative attitude toward authority position him as a classic alienated teenager whose mutations are also visual expressions of his own adolescent angst. Again, Kristeva's notion of abjection, this time in the sociocultural sense of the expulsion from the body politic of what is marginal, outcast, or simply "unclean," is useful here since Tetsuo and his friends (and the original mutant subjects) are all coded as social excrescences. It is worth

remembering that Tetsuo's first encounter with the mutants is beside the crater of old Tokyo. This "hole" has many associations with the abject. As a crater from a nuclear bomb it brings up links with death and destruction, unwelcome intrusions into the empty glittering world of Neo Tokyo. Psychoanalytically, the crater may be read in terms of both the vagina and the anus. Coded as the female organ, the crater evokes the dryness and emptiness of atrophy and absence, once again underlining the absence of the maternal throughout the film. Coded as the body orifice associated with excretion, the crater is a metonym for the status of the bikers and the mutants, children and adolescents necessary only as fodder for the industrial and scientific demands of their dystopian world.

In many regards Tetsuo conforms well to Bukatman's description of the outcast mutants of American comic books: "While they want to fit in, mutants know their birthright is to exist 'outside' the normative. They are categorical mistakes of a specific type; they are, in short, *adolescents*."¹⁶ This characterization is also appropriate for Tetsuo's story as a whole, which is a classic example of the adolescent fascination with what Freud calls the "omnipotence of thought,"¹⁷ the ability to use psychic powers to change the world around oneself, a world that is seen as disappointing, rejecting, and dangerous. Thanks to his newly found telekinetic powers, Tetsuo can indulge in wish-fulfilling vengeance on the world that has disappointed him. As Bukatman says of the outsider mutant's attitude toward the social system, "At issue is not whether our social system is well- or ill-articulated; at issue is the mapping of the adolescent subject onto a social order that is *perceived by that subject* as arbitrary, exclusionary, and incomprehensible."¹⁸

Ultimately, Tetsuo manages to revenge himself on the social order (and implicitly on his parents who abandoned him to the orphanage), succeeding in virtually destroying it in the violence and explosions that strew the second half of the film. Given the generally safe and contained nature of Japanese society, this orgy of destruction is especially interesting. While Tetsuo, in his down-and-out biker identity, is clearly not a "normal" teenager (if there are any left in the film's dystopia), it seems likely that his anger and vengefulness may have touched a chord among the viewing public who made the film such a popular hit. Even among those viewers who were no longer

adolescent, the image of a youth going up against and destructively triumphing against a repressive society that in certain ways was a daring but not totally distant defamiliarization of today's Japan, is likely to have had a cathartic effect.

Tetsuo's "accomplishments" come at a cost, however. His powers and the newfound arrogance that come with them alienate his few remaining friends and in the end, like so many of the protagonists of horror films, he is utterly alone. His "intimate apocalypse" has been vengeful not only to others but to his core identity as well. The eye that stares out at the audience at the film's end may suggest a new form of vision but, given the nihilistic events of the film's narrative, it seems reasonable to imagine that the final vision is a cold one, detached from any human concerns. The movie's nihilistic celebration of abjection and finally of extinction suggest no hope for change within the actual fabric of society.

RANMA 1/2: "DON'T YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BOY AND A GIRL DADDY?"

Segregating the sexes during childhood and defining the contexts and nature of their encounters later on, Japanese society defines gender roles with adamantine rules. In the realm of the imaginary, the strict roles encapsulating male and female are broken, being transgressed in fantasies which can be singly and variously violent, sadistic, maudlin, sentimental or comical . . .

—Nicholas Boronoff, *The Pursuit and Politics of Sex in Japan*

. . . identification is always an ambivalent process. Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This "being a man" and this "being a woman" are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses

us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.

—Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*

While *Akira* turns its back on normality to present an extravagant spectacle of the monstrous, *Ranma 1/2*, our next work to be discussed, portrays its eponymous hero as frenziedly seeking the normal. Both *Akira* and *Ranma 1/2* play on the motif of the changing adolescent body but while *Akira* presents the changing body as menacing, *Ranma 1/2* uses it largely for comic effect. To put it another way, *Akira* is fundamentally apocalyptic, although it participates in the festival mode, while *Ranma 1/2*, although containing episodes of destruction and even elegiac interludes, is largely a celebration of the festival. Both texts feature adolescent protagonists who deal with such classic adolescent issues as isolation, jealousy, and generational conflict,¹⁹ constructed around the motif of uncontrollable metamorphoses. However, in keeping with *Ranma 1/2*'s festival mode, and in sharp contrast to *Akira*'s vision of Armageddon, *Ranma*'s metamorphoses threaten but never completely overturn the social structure. Furthermore, the metamorphoses in *Ranma 1/2* are gendered ones, from male to female or vice versa, which raises issues of sexual identity that Tetsuo's lonely monstrosity only subtextually evokes.²⁰

Like *Akira*, *Ranma 1/2* is based on a long-running comic book series (by the immensely popular female artist Takahashi Rumiko) and has inspired feature-length movies as well. For our purposes we will concentrate on the long running animated television series. Since the series went on for many episodes, a slightly different form of analysis is called for than with an epic film such as *Akira*. Due to the episodic nature of television comedy there is far less emphasis on character development or an overall story line (although many might argue that *Akira* is not nearly as structured as an American science fiction or horror film would be). What is emphasized in *Ranma 1/2* are certain comic tropes such as pursuit, mistaken identity, and usually amusing, sometimes poignant, character interaction.

Popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the series is an imaginative comic romance that plays with gender (mis)identification through a fantasized form of transexuality. *Ranma Saotome*, the hero

of the series, is fated to transfer back and forth between male and female, due to the workings of an arbitrary curse. Unlike the protagonists of such famous Western treatments of cross dressing as *Tootsie* or *Yentl*, Ranna has no choice in the matter. He is a literal representation of Butler's vision of the "norm that chooses us."²¹ Unfortunately for Ranna, two norms choose him, and his very public and haphazard boundary-crossing between male and female creates confusion not only for him but also for those around him. They are uncomfortably aware of a threatening destabilization of social boundaries without necessarily understanding the reasons for their own discomfort. *Akira* plays with boundaries in order to break them, but *Ranna 1/2* plays with them to a different, ultimately conservative, effect. Despite its emphasis on boundary transgressions, humorous generational reverses, and explicit (although humorous) sexual content (both reminiscent of the festival and the carnival), *Ranna 1/2*'s transgressions are always contained within the realistic space of the "normal" world. While boundaries are crossed and re-crossed to often riotous effect, the inevitably more conservative format of a weekly television series ultimately leads to a conservative resolution in which, at the end of each episode, the boundaries are reinscribed into the conventions of heterosexual hierarchical society.

Ranna 1/2 operates on at least two levels: the issue of constructing gender identity at the individual level and the public level of society's expectations for gender norms, both of which are played out in the series through a range of imaginative visual tropes and action sequences that consistently work to destabilize the "normal." Because *Ranna 1/2* is a comedy, these forms of destabilization are frequently very funny, as Ranna makes his/her way across a somewhat unconventional but still familiar contemporary landscape of school and family, unwittingly spreading confusion and sometimes outright craziness at every turn. At times the very wildness and unexpectedness of the comedy can lead to moments of liberating self-knowledge on the part of its protagonists. At other times, however, the series seems to be more in-line with such Western gender bending comedies as *Some Like It Hot* or *I Was A Male War Bride* in which gender crossing is held up only as an amusing performance that temporarily disturbs but never actually unsettles society's basic assumptions about the genders.²²

In contrast to the cyberpunk future of *Akira*, *Ranna 1/2* is set in a fairly realistic teenage world, into which a bizarre or alien element suddenly interjects itself. In the case of *Ranna 1/2*, it is the hero who is the "alien," but his marginalization is of a very different sort than that of Tetsuo. Ranna is simply a regular high school boy who falls into a magic spring while practicing martial arts with his father. The magic of the spring causes him to turn into a girl when touched by cold water and to return to male form when touched by warm water. Ranna's father, Mr. Saotome, is also magically cursed by falling into a spring that turns him into a giant panda, a condition that is also alleviated with hot water. Since rainy days, hot baths, and ponds or pools abound in the series, the opportunities for inadvertent metamorphoses are plentiful. It is important to note, however, that Mr. Saotome's panda guise causes little consternation. It is Ranna's gender transformation that is the key narrative impetus in the series.

Most of the series' action takes place in urban Japan, principally around the *dōjō* (martial arts hall) owned and resided in by the Tendō family (a father and his three daughters, with whom Ranna and his father seem to be permanent guests) and the Furinkan high school, which Ranna attends along with the Tendō daughters. Of the daughters, the youngest, Akane, is the most fully developed character. Like Ranna, she too is a brilliantly gifted martial artist, but she is also a tomboy who insists that she hates boys, although they constantly flock to her beauty.

The opening episode of *Ranna 1/2* is worth looking at in some detail as it displays some of the most prominent tropes and tensions maintained throughout the series. In the opening scene the "camera" follows what appears to be a young girl in Chinese dress and pigtails as she argues with a giant panda while they walk down a rainy street. As agitated onlookers scatter, the panda picks up the girl and slings her over his shoulder. The action cuts to the Tendō's Japanese style house complete with a traditional pond. They are anxiously awaiting the arrival of their father's old martial arts companion, Mr. Saotome, and his son Ranna. Mr. Tendō tells his daughters that he hopes that Ranna might choose one of them to marry and thus carry on the "Tendō family tradition." The girls are curious but skeptical, especially Akane—she is introduced in a scene where she is being warned by her older sister that "the boys" will think she is "weird" if she continues

her absorption in marital arts. Akane resists the idea of a fiancé chosen by her father, arguing that the daughters should have a say in whom they are going to marry.

As they talk, the doors open and the giant panda and Chinese girl appear, much to everyone's consternation. The girl announces that she is Ranna and Mr. Tendō, choosing to believe that "she" is a boy, folds her in a close embrace only to become uncomfortably aware that "he" has breasts. His daughters laugh sardonically and one of them, poking Ranna's breasts, asks "Don't you know the difference between a boy and a girl, Daddy?"

The rest of the episode consists of the Tendō family's gradual realization that this may be a difficult question to answer since Ranna is also a boy. Akane, who is at first pleased that Ranna is a girl and suggests that they be friends, is the first to discover Ranna's duality. She goes into the family bath only to discover Ranna, who has been changed back into boy form by the bath's hot water. Shrieking "pervert!" she runs naked from the bath, followed by Ranna. Ranna explains the story of his and his father's change but the girls are more amused than sympathetic. Akane's older sisters laughingly suggest that "Akane would be the wisest choice [for marriage] since she hates boys . . . and Ranna's half a girl." Akane, however, is affronted by the suggestion, calling Ranna a pervert for having seen her naked. He points out that, "You took a pretty good look at me [while I was naked]. And anyway, it's no big deal to see a naked girl since I see myself plenty of times, and I'm better built to boot." Akane becomes even angrier and Ranna mournfully thinks to himself "So much for being friends when she found out that I'm a boy." The episode ends with Ranna (now in female form) and Akane once again confronting each other nude in the bathroom. The two stalk off in silence and go to complain to their respective family members.

In this opening episode (and in many of the best episodes of the series) the narrative is structured around a series of reversed expectations through which both characters and audience are consistently surprised, and, in the case of the characters, often outraged. Appropriately to the world of the festival, normal social conventions are consistently undermined. What is anticipated to be a traditional reunion among old friends becomes a bizarre and disturbing event. Taking a bath leads to a frightening and unexpected encounter. And a boy

makes fun of a girl's body by telling her that his body is "better built." This kind of complex plot, replete with humorous surprises involving gender transgression, is one that is familiar to Western audiences as well, at least as far back as the time of *Twelfth Night*. Like the Shakespearean comedies and many others up until recently, the comic and fantastic nature of the plot, while thoroughly enjoyable on the surface, is also one that serves to hide or displace some important and serious issues of power and identity.

Thus, the comic high points of this opening episode are often predicated on a variety of tensions around which the series revolves. The most important of these have to do with gender identification on both a personal and a public level. At the personal level, the viewer watches the appealing characters of Ranna and, at certain moments, Akane as they attempt to construct their gender identities while navigating the confusing tides of adolescence. At the public level, the series shows the gender norms that society attempts to impose upon them through the agencies of school and family. Issues of sexual identity, generational conflict, and societal confusion, are all invoked through Ranna's constant and haphazard transformation as he becomes variously an object of fear, derision, puzzlement, and, most often, desire.

Examining *Ranma 1/2* first from the point of view of individual development, it is worthwhile to consider cultural studies scholar Elizabeth Grosz's description of adolescence and the body in *Volatile Bodies* where she asserts that

[adolescence] is the period that the subject feels the greatest discord between the body image and the lived body, between its psychical idealized self-image and bodily changes . . . The adolescent body is commonly experienced as awkward, alienating, an undesired biological imposition.²³

Ranna's "discord" between image and reality is literally enacted for him in his constant transformations and is further emphasized by the reactions of those around him who, as we saw in the first episode, become puzzled, shocked, or even angry upon witnessing his metamorphoses. On the most general level, we can see this discord as going beyond body or even gender construction and

instead expressing simply the agonies attendant on the construction of identity in adolescence. Stripped of its fantasy elements, the opening episode can be viewed as a classic encapsulation of some of the problems attendant on growing up, adolescent loneliness, in particular. Neither boy nor girl, Ranna occupies a liminal space that, although played for comedy, is actually a forlorn and isolated one. Unlike the typical narcissistic adolescent who simply *feels* "different," Ranna *knows* he is different, and therefore isolated. Or as he puts it at the end of the episode, "Friends, she says: so much for being friends when she found out that I'm a boy."

Ranna's statement of disappointment brings us back to the body confusion that expresses his alienation and raises the question *why* can't Akane be friends with him now that she knows he's a boy. The answer lies in the strict gender construction on which his and Akane's world is based. As Boronoff says in the quotation at the beginning of this section, "Japanese society defines gender roles with adamant rules." In fact, these adamant rules are not restricted to Japan (although it is true that the sexes are more segregated there than in the West) but are universal ones that bear particular weight during the tumultuous period of adolescence. Despite the carnival-esque nature of the situations they are thrust into, neither Akane nor Ranna himself can go beyond the rules of the real world, particularly because they are adolescents, a stage where ambiguity can be alluring but at the same time is deeply frightening. To quote Grosz again, "it is only in adolescence that it becomes clear that the subject has a sexual, i.e., genital, position *whether this is wanted or not*."²⁴ The unfortunate Ranna who was presumably just beginning to come to grips with the male sexual subject position is now forced to express the female one as well and in extremely graphic and often humiliating terms.

Thus, although references to genitalia are conspicuous by their virtual absence in *Ranna 1/2*, the sexual signifier of breasts is constantly invoked throughout the series to denote that something is "wrong." This is clear in the opening episode where Mr. Tendō attempts to ignore the strange fact that he has a giant panda and a Chinese girl in his living room by embracing the "male" Ranna, only to fall into a faint at the evidence of Ranna's breasts, a sexual signifier that he is simply unable to process into his orderly world. Even more telling is Ranna's flashback to his initial discovery of his female

transformation. In that scene Ranna rises from the spring, tears open his shirt, stares at his breasts in shock, and shrieks.

The fact that breasts, the signifier of femininity, mark the alien is significant. Although it is true that many gender bending comedies emphasize men with false breasts for comic effect, in Ranna's case his breasts are not only comic but—initially at least—*horrifying* as well.²⁵ It is interesting to note that the other consistent metamorphoses occurring throughout the early part of series are also enacted *only* by men. Ranna's father becomes a panda, a guise in which he seems quite comfortable, since the viewer often sees him in panda form happily reading his newspaper while munching on a stick of bamboo. Ryōga, one of Ranna's competitors transforms into an adorable miniature pig, unhappily at first, but he becomes increasingly philosophical about it as he realizes that this allows him to sleep with Akane. It is clear therefore that the male is the norm, and it is the female that is one of a variety of attributes (including panda-ness, pig-ness) that signify difference. Furthermore, being female is coded as being inferior to either a pig or a panda.

Whereas turning from female into male is usually seen in many fantasies as a means of empowerment, Ranna's transformation from male to female is clearly coded as negative. As scholar Rebecca Bell-Metereau puts it in her discussion of androgyny and cross-dressing in Western film, "[I]mpersonating a woman involves anxiety over loss of power, because it means that the male must identify with a typically lower-status figure."²⁶ In the first episode, for example, Ranna's father tosses him into the Tendō's pond, shouting "you have betrayed the honor of this house." Later on in the same episode his father is even more direct shouting, "Ranna, you sound like a girl!" He then picks up Ranna-as-boy and throws him into the pond again, presumably to have Ranna's form correspond to his "girlish" behavior. Ranna's very identity as a martial artist is threatened as well, because he is shorter and physically weaker as a girl. In a later episode Ranna is forced to enter in a martial arts competition while stuck in girl form. Although he wins in the end, his friends have little confidence in him because they are aware that even his martial arts expertise may not make up for his female limitations. Ranna's girlishness thus adds an extra tension to an already intense action sequence.

Ranna-as-girl is a problematic figure. Physically weaker than the boy Ranna, a disappointment to his father, a puzzle to his peers,

rejected by a girl he likes (Akane), Ranna-as-girl is the fantastic embodiment of certain key adolescent fears. Perhaps one of the most terrifying of these fears is what literary scholar Eve Sedgwick calls "homosexual panic," the fear of the heterosexual male that he is really homosexual. This fear is played out in a variety of episodes throughout the series.

The first and most obvious example occurs in the second episode of the series, when Ranna first enters high school. Ranna attempts to rescue Akane from the loathsome attentions of Kuno, a pompous upperclassman who is also a master kendo swordsman. Unfortunately, Ranna turns into a girl while in the midst of a martial arts fight with Kuno and Kuno falls in love with "the pig-tailed girl" not realizing that "she" is actually the boy he is trying to fight. Kuno's confusion and Ranna's embarrassment come to a head when Ranna meets Kuno after school the following day for what Ranna expects to be fight. Instead of bringing his sword, however, Kuno offers flowers to Ranna-as-girl, telling him "I love you." As for Kuno's feelings toward Ranna-as-boy, he has taken an active dislike, taunting him for his cowardice and asserting "that man is no man."

The episode after this encounter with Kuno opens with a dream sequence in which Ranna imagines himself naked in the bath in his male form and confronting Kuno, who tells him, "I love you." Shouting, "Look at me you fool, I'm a guy," Ranna suddenly falls into a swimming pool where the cold water turns him into a female. Naked in the pool Ranna imagines that he is surrounded by a circle of naked Kunos who chant to him "I love you. I would date you." Waking up covered with sweat, Ranna thinks "That Kuno's sick!"

Once again, this episode is played for comedy with the rather effete and pompous Kuno being the butt of the joke. The fear of homosexuality that is the episode's subtext however, lends it a slightly more serious tone than many episodes in the series. When Kuno shouts "that man is no man" the obvious joke is again on Kuno because he is unknowingly technically correct, since Ranna is half woman as well. But the unconscious joke is on Ranna who projects his own fears of being "sick" (i.e., not heterosexual) onto Kuno. In addition, when Ranna tries to assert his masculinity in his dream (nightmare), his own body betrays him, nakedly revealing its essential femininity to an equally naked Kuno who circles him in a threatening

and engulfing manner. It is hardly surprising that Ranna wakes up covered with sweat.

Even more potentially disturbing is a much later episode, "*Watashi te Kire? Ranna no onna senger*" ("Am I Pretty? Ranna's Declaration of Womanhood") in which Ranna loses control of both his body and his mind in a manner that links him explicitly to both homosexuality and androgyny. Struck on the head by Akane, Ranna loses all memory of himself as a boy and believes that he is a girl, who unaccountably sometimes takes on the form of a boy. In his new mental state Ranna becomes parodically feminine. Being forced to hang up boys underwear (his own), Ranna bursts into tears but is delighted when Akane invites him to go shopping. At the department store, however, he creates a scene when in his male form he picks up a bra and models it, asking Akane "Do you think this will look good on me?" which causes the other customers to turn on them in horror. As a final humiliation, Ranna tries to use the men's room but is too embarrassed to urinate. Later on at home, he faints at the sight of blood, and that night comes into Akane's room "too frightened" to be able to sleep by himself.

The extremely broad sexual stereotyping of this episode is emphasized in the Japanese language version by the exaggeratedly feminine language Ranna now uses. Given that Ranna usually speaks quite roughly when in either male or female form, the emphatic feminine language is particularly disconcerting to his family and friends. At one point, Akane even angrily says, "Stop talking like a faggot!" (*okama mitai na hanishikata yamenasai*—the English dubbing has "stop speaking so affectedly" but the Japanese version uses the explicit term "*okama*," a slang term for homosexual). The episode veers away from dealing with homosexuality per se, however, and instead develops into an intriguing and even refreshing treatment of androgyny. Ranna-as-girl insists that she truly feels much more at home as a girl, asserting that, "The real me has awakened and the other person was just fake memories."

Ranna does seem to throw himself into femininity, becoming a truly sweet and obliging person. While Ranna's father and Mr. Tendō become increasingly reconciled to Ranna's new girl persona, especially after he cooks them a delicious meal, Akane grows more and more distraught. Ultimately, she ends up weeping for the old "nasty"

Ranma to return. Fortunately for Akane, Ranma ends up hitting his head again and turns back into his male self and she shrieks in delight "Oh Ranma, you've come back."

The episode is an interesting one not only for its exceptionally broad pandering to traditional gender stereotypes but also for how much Ranma seems to thrill in being a girl. While his hesitant characterization of "the real me" as feminine is of course played for laughs, it also at least momentarily points to an insistent bisexuality or even androgyny at the heart of *Ranma 1/2*. One of the pleasures of this series is the fact that male and female viewers can play with the idea of taking on masculine and feminine roles. The fact that both fathers actually come around to *accepting* Ranma as a girl is a particularly interesting reversal, especially when we recall earlier episodes in which his father seemed about to disown him because he had changed into a girl. In intriguing contrast, this episode actually shows the two fathers agreeing that the new "all girl" Ranma might actually work to "balance out" Akane's tomboyishness creating a more harmonious collective family. Despite the initial annoyance at his "homosexual" style language, this episode seems to suggest the availability of a wider continuum of sexual choices than the final inevitably conservative affirmation of bounded heterosexuality ("Oh Ranma, you've come back") would seem to offer.

The only person who is really bothered by Ranma's new femininity is Akane and it is interesting to examine her character in relation to these questions of homosexuality and androgyny. It is clear that Ranma is not the only character with a confusing gender identity in the series. This is obvious from the first episode in which her sister, finding her practicing martial arts alone in the training hall, tells her, "No wonder the boys think you're odd." Akane responds, "At least I don't only think about boys." Akane is in many ways Ranma's feminine "double," both mirroring and distorting his own gender identity problems. Although she is attractive and feminine (and without overtly masculine speech patterns), Akane is clearly shown as "different," not only from her sisters, but also from the other high school girls. In fact, her devotion to the martial arts causes severe problems. In an amusingly outrageous sequence in the second episode, Akane is seen confronting all the boys in her high school as she enters the schoolyard. She is forced to defend herself against a vast array of

attacks by athletes in virtually every field, from sumo wrestlers to tennis players, all of whom are competing in order to win the chance to "date" her. Akane's only response is to take on and defeat every one of them, all the while intoning "I hate boys! I hate boys."

Akane's gender coding is thus in some ways more extreme than that of Ranma who, even as a boy, seems to like girls. However, she is carefully presented as having feminine aspects as well. One of the series subplots involves Akane's unrequited love for the family doctor, Dr. Tofu, who is passionately in love with her elder sister. As the series progresses, Akane's unrequited love for Dr. Tofu begins to dissipate and there are increasing suggestions that she and Ranma are beginning to appreciate each other. Well before the "Am I Pretty?" episode, Ranma is shown as becoming more sensitive and kind, especially where Akane is concerned, and Akane, while often furious with him, occasionally acknowledges his sensitivity.

While, as Butler says, "there is a cost to every identification," sometimes there may be a benefit as well. The two protagonists' implicit identification with the opposite sex opens up the potential for genuine self-knowledge and even, in Ranma's case at least, empathy for the opposite sex. As the series develops, Ranma overcomes the problems of his physical weakness as a girl by relying more on strategy than physical strength. In various episodes he learns to use his female attractiveness for manipulative purposes and in a later episode (Episode 15) he even begins to enjoy indulging his fondness for sweet deserts, a partiality coded as feminine in Japan. Although it is never explicitly suggested that Ranma is growing more in touch with his feminine side, his behavior appears to develop what would traditionally be considered a more feminine style.²⁷ Furthermore, while Ranma-as-girl is essentially negatively coded by society, it is Ranma-as-girl who engenders all the narrative excitement, adding an intriguing note of androgynous fantasy to what otherwise might be a more standard martial arts comedy.

In fact, Ranma-as-girl in her Chinese clothes and pigtail is very attractive, perhaps because her Sinicized accoutrements are a displaced reflection of the more profound Otherness of Ranma's primary masculine sexuality. As both male and female, Ranma suggests an extremely appealing form of androgyny, one that recalls the so-called *bishōnen* ("beautiful boy" comic books), which often contain explicitly

homosexual encounters while at the same time being largely targeted at young female readers.²⁸ The *bishōnen* comic books are only one example from a larger fantasy world in Japanese culture in which androgyny and gender-crossing are staple tropes.²⁹ What Boronoff calls the "realm of the imaginary" includes such famous cultural institutions as the all-male kabuki theater where *onnagata*, or female impersonators, were traditionally raised from boyhood to be more womanly than a woman. A more contemporary example of gender-bending fantasy would be the renowned Takarazuka acting troops, in which women take all the parts in plays that themselves often revolve around plots based on comic books including *bishōnen* comics.³⁰ What is unusual about *Ranma 1/2*, however, is that the protagonist's particular "realm of the imaginary" keeps colliding with the "real world" of high school and family. This provides a different kind of tension in the series that the more purely fantastic treatments do not.

The relation between body image and desire is paramount in Ranma's relations with the outside world. His public transformations ensure his objectification by others in a variety of ways. To his father his transformations make him an object of embarrassment. To others they are a source of fascination and he becomes an object of desire. Kuno no doubt finds the "pig tailed" girl particularly attractive because of her mysterious provenance and tendency to disappear abruptly. Many others find him/her an object of intense desire as well. Indeed, much of the action in subsequent, increasingly broad episodes consists of Ranma fleeing various male and female figures who have fallen madly in love with one or the other of his identities. The mad pursuit of the ever-transforming Ranma, and the ambiguously gender-coded Akane is evocative of Shakespearean comedy in which cross-dressing becomes a catalyst for a variety of misidentifications and misadventures.

As in Shakespeare, Ranma's changes usually set into motion an intense amount of narrative activity revolving around pursuit and competition. The object of pursuit/competition is usually Ranma, although sometimes also Akane. At other times it is Ranma himself pursuing the ultimate prize, the magic that will turn him back into a boy permanently. Later in the series, the theme of pursuit and desire widens to include Happosai, an old man who, despite being introduced as Mr. Saotome and Mr. Tendo's martial arts master, is usually presented as a shrunken old lecher in pursuit of panties and bras.

Competition, the other hallmark of the series, appears as various forms of martial arts or athletic tournaments. The series contains an inordinate number of scenes of frenzied activity as one or more of the characters is either chased by a huge crowd or forced to perform in increasingly bizarre forms of competition including even a martial arts ski tournament. Accompanied by fast-paced music, the images speed by at a dizzying pace, but the prize (Ranma, Akane, panties, magic potions) is never permanently won, allowing for ever more bizarre variations on the theme.

The series' twin themes of pursuit and competition can also be read as comic and/or fantastic exaggerations of contemporary Japanese society. While the frenzied but essentially aimless motion of the bikers in *Akira* underlined the contrast between them and their immovably dystopian society, the privileging of movement in *Ranma 1/2* suggests a parody of the intensely pressured real world of contemporary Japan in which everyone—workers, students, housewives—is in constant pursuit of some ever-receding goal.

Although played as festive comedy, the underlying sense of oppressive pressure is hard to avoid. Thus, the scene in which the entire spectrum of athletes vies for Akane mixes the themes of competition and pursuit in a scene that is both ferociously comic but also strangely unsettling in its fantastic exaggeration; every time Akane dispatches one pursuer/competitor another takes his place. Interestingly, many of the series' episodes revolve around competition among girls who compete as ruthlessly (and sometimes more craftily) than the boys.

Perhaps the most consistent display of competition, however, is between the generations, specifically between Ranma and his father, who are constantly fighting. Much of this is clearly for humorous effect as Ranma and his father throw each other into water and swish constantly back and forth between male and female and human and panda. But the sharply clear note of rivalry is impossible to ignore, as when Mr. Saotome complains that his son has disgraced him by being a girl and Ranma appropriately ripostes, "who are you to talk? . . . My old man is a panda!"

While far removed from the rage that Tetsuo turns on authority figures in *Akira*, this riposte still suggests some deep divisions between the generations, especially in relation to the father. The fall in the

stature of the father since World War II has been a staple theme in much of Japanese culture both high and popular, and both the passive panda Mr. Saotome and the amusingly inept Mr. Tendō are honorable descendants in a long line of inadequate father figures.³¹ In this regard it is interesting that so much of the conflict between father and son takes place in the traditional setting of the dōjō. The house, hall, and garden are all exemplary models of traditional Japanese culture and the contrast between their traditional serenity and the constant thumping, transforming, and splashing of father/panda and son/Chinese girl makes for superb comic dissonance while also evoking the unsettling strangeness of change that has penetrated even into the most traditional corners of Japan.

Faithful to its comic form *Ranma 1/2* always manages, if only barely, to contain the chaos each episode unleashes. The tropes of adolescence such as generational conflict, competitive pressures, and struggles with identity construction that we saw dealt with so darkly in *Akira* are given a lighthearted treatment here: While *Akira* showed the cathartic destruction of what was left of the world of adult authority, *Ranma 1/2* shows its farcical subversion. Despite their very strong differences in tone, however, both *Akira* and *Ranma 1/2* revolve around the exultant privileging of change. This change is exemplified in the work's fundamental visions of bodies out of control whose memorable transformations are presented in each work as simultaneously exhilarating and threatening. Ultimately *Ranma 1/2*'s narrative framework allows the threat to dissipate, while *Akira*'s open-ended text suggests possibilities of ominous empowerment, but both texts allow the viewer to entertain, if only briefly, a pleasure predicated in going beyond the fetters of the physical.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTROLLING BODIES: THE BODY IN PORNOGRAPHIC ANIME

The womb is the source of all energy and life for a female ninja. If you control the womb, you control the woman.

La Blue Girl

I'm going to change.

Cutey Honey

BEFORE BEGINNING THE DISCUSSION about sexually explicit anime (what will be referred to as the pornographic genre here) it should first be understood that, while not totally mainstream, pornography is