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THE HUMAN MECHA: TITAN, TECHNOLOGY, AND SELF IN *ATTACK ON TITAN*

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## ABSTRACT

THE HUMAN MECHA: TITAN, TECHNOLOGY, AND SELF IN *ATTACK ON TITAN*

BY MAX HE

This paper focuses on the figure of the Titans in Hajime Isayama's best selling manga series *Attack on Titan*. Grotesque, horrifying, but most certainly entrancing in their violence, I argue that the Titan is a representation of the mecha (humanoid robot) trope in manga and anime, at once human and monster, in form, and technology, in allegory. The connection between human and technology, though known, is often taken for granted. The body of the Titan is where the human and machine meet, the site where their interdependent dynamic is explored. Just as the pilot is necessarily connected to the mecha, humanity is necessarily connected to technology, being its creator, user, and thus the autonomous agent behind its operation. In the doomsday setting of *Attack on Titan*, the vehicle of the apocalypse is neither explicitly technology nor humanoid machine, but rather the Titan: giant, macrocosmic manifestations of the human. On a larger scale, the Titans become a site of self-reflection, magnifying some of the more neglected aspects and tendencies of human nature.

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## METHODOLOGY

As a work of manga, *Attack on Titan* resists more traditional modes of interpretation. Published serially over the course of over a decade, the manga consists of 139 chapters (not including supplemental one-shot chapters), each chapter being roughly 40 to 50 pages long. Of course, its length can be attributed to the fact that manga is a visual medium, using the art of illustration to enhance the reader's aesthetic experience. My analytic framework is heavily guided by close readings of several panels in the primary text, many of which will be included in this paper. I also read the primary text alongside other relevant mecha and technologically-focused manga and anime. In addition, I reference existing scholarship to help establish several patterns within the mecha genre.

Despite the huge fanbase and readership, scholarship concerning this work is quite rare, given that its completion was less than two years prior to the completion of this paper. Much of the existing scholarship was written concurrently with *Attack on Titan's* serialization, and consequently lacked proper orientation on the plot, which is thoroughly complex and unpredictable. Most scholarship has not been fortunate enough to even reach the reveal of the outside world, one of the many defining plot twists of the series. As such, with a broadened scope and a now-completed plot, I am privileged with the task of reading the figure of the Titan in the context of the full story.

### ***Attack on Titan (2009-2021)***

Although *Attack on Titan* (*Shingeki no Kyojin* 2009–2021) stands alone as manga artist Hajime Isayama's only serialized work, it reigns as one of the most influential pieces of literature in the Japanese comic (manga) tradition. As one of the most decorated manga series of all time, its influence extends beyond the Japanese borders, becoming an international sensation with a global audience. Since 2013, the manga has been accompanied by an animated adaptation which rivals its viewership, and contributed quite significantly to its readership. As the title suggests, the story is largely centered around Titans: giant, humanoid creatures who roam around devouring any human that they see, seemingly without aim or reason.

The Titan, as an emissary of violence and the grotesque, is what draws in this immense readership. Isayama's representation of these fragile humans, helpless in the face of these monstrosities, is a sight that is at once incredibly disturbing, but even more incredibly captivating. Readers find themselves compelled to turn page after page, in hopes of seeing more of these creatures that are at once so similar to us, yet so different from us. These Titans have garnered enough interest to warrant publications of anatomical charts behind the "science" of these mysterious creatures. They are described as humanoid, man-eating creatures that typically stand between two and fifteen meters tall (with some exceptions). Taking the form of a male physique, often with aberrations like an enlarged gut, head, or other disproportions, they possess

no reproductive organs, which left the question of how they came to be unanswered until much later in the story.

The Titans began the story as the primary antagonistic force against the humans of Paradis, a nation surrounded by three concentric walls, acting as the barrier between their civilization and the Titans that roam outside. These humans, having lived surrounded by these layers of walls for the last century, believe themselves to be the last stand of humanity in a world otherwise ravaged by these Titans (Fig. 1). The story quickly moves from one of survival against the Titans to a one littered with incongruities on Paradis and the world outside. Heavy emphasis is placed on the military, as well as its oppressive, corrupt nature. Members of the Garrison regiment, responsible for manning the walls, are constantly drunk on the job, unprepared for what may happen. The Military Police branch suppresses any curiosity on the origins of the walls and the Titans. Going outside the walls is strictly prohibited, except for the Scout Regiment, the branch of the military which, with its 50-percent mortality rate, dedicates itself to venturing outside the walls, attempting to take territory there (unsuccessfully of course), and killing the occasional Titan. Initially, all Titans were thought, to a large extent, to act similarly to one another, much like animals. However, the reader eventually comes to discover that there exist nine special Titans (known quite concisely as “The Nine Titans” or “intelligent Titans”) each possessing not only special abilities as well as ability for conscious thought, but are controlled by a human within. The story revolves around a boy named Eren Jaeger, who discovers that he has the

power of the Attack Titan, one of the Nine. As a Scout, he's dedicated his heart, vowing to kill all the Titans in his relentless pursuit for freedom.

After years of fighting Titans, fighting humans, and even having friends turn out to be enemy Titans, they discover the truth of the world: the nation of Paradis is an island, and that the rest of the world is thriving with technology that far exceeds their capabilities. The people of Paradis belong to a race called Eldians, who have the unique ability to transform into Titans, having used this ability to rule the world for the better part of two millenia. After the rest of the world united to take down the Eldians, the majority of the Eldians were pushed back into what they now call Paradis, surrounded by the walls, which are made out of Titan hardening and contain millions of dormant, colossal, 60-meter Titans. The remainder of the Eldians are scattered around the world, facing heavy persecution wherever they go, forced to take blood tests, wear armbands, and live in ghettos. The original Pure Titans turned out to be former Eldians, (mostly revolutionaries like Eldian nationalists and restorationists), forced by the nation of Marley to transform into Titans and roam eternally on the island as a form of punishment. The story culminates with Eren gaining the ability to control the Titans, then weaponizing it in order to destroy all the lands and people outside of the walls, as his friends and foes alike attempt to stop him in his tracks.



represents the autonomous will of the controller: the human. The Titan, more than a body, is the site where the relationship between these not-so-opposites of human and machine are explored. In the doomsday setting of *Attack on Titan*, the vehicle for apocalypse is manifested not as machine or robot, but rather as Titan: organic, macrocosmic reflections of the human self.



## Human or Monster?

Before we conceive of the Titan as a mecha, we must first understand the Titan as a monster. “The monster always escapes,” writes Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his book *Monster Theory*. Many monsters in cultural history are known to evade the public eye. The Loch Ness monster, the Yeti, Godzilla, and in literature, Frankenstein’s monster, all evade the watchful gaze of the audience. The Titan is no different; though they may be seen outside the walls, and though they willingly approach humans (to eat them, of course), they resist any attempts to decipher the mystery of their bodies. For Cohen, the monstrous body must be read as a symbolic body. Understanding the Titan constitutes the understanding of one’s culture, one’s fears and desires, and ultimately, oneself.

The Colossus Titans’s two attacks against Paradis Island, in Chapters 1 and 4, respectively, both see it destroying a gate and immediately vanishing. Eren notes this in the second attack, which he was immediately present for. As Eren prepared to strike the Titan, which had simply appeared seemingly out of nowhere, the Colossus Titan suddenly released an outburst of hot steam which blew Eren away while clouding the immediate vicinity. As he remarks that he missed, he comes to the realization that the Titan had simply vanished into thin air, noting that the same thing happened 5 years ago (Fig. 2). This pattern of disappearance is by no means exclusive to the Colossus Titan, or any of the other Nine, for that matter. Even after it was revealed that some characters have the ability to transform to and from their Titan form, the

transformations were mostly hidden, instead just showing a lightning strike which indicates its occurrence. When Ymir transformed for the first time, shown in Chapter 40, the transformation was not seen at all. The massive Titan body that the shifter once occupied is likewise gone without a trace. In fact, when any Titan is killed (or in the case of a Titan shifter, transformed back into human form), the body quickly evaporates in a cloud of steam, flesh and bones gone, quite the ironic, yet fitting fate to a creature that engulfs humans, reducing them back to nothing. This aspect of their nature complicates any attempts to examine the Titan physiologically; when dead, it dissolves, and when alive, it actively tries to kill any human in its vicinity. Despite this, the Survey Corps “dedicates their hearts” to understand the Titan in various different ways. “What are they biologically?” “Why do they eat humans?” These are a few of the questions that guide their quest to understand the Titan.



Fig. 2. Isayama, Hajime, Disappearance of the Colossus Titan, Chapter 4, 2009.

In spite of the challenges, they managed to capture two Pure Titans in the course of the story. These Titans, nicknamed Sonny and Beane (after Sawney Bean, the infamous Scottish criminal), were subjected to countless experiments. The Corps, or more specifically, Hange Zoë, the squad leader primarily responsible for Titan research, attempted experiments in communication, pain tolerance, activity level, and so on and so forth. While none of the more pressing questions, such as where the Titans came from or why they eat humans, remained unanswered, the Corps was able to extract some information on their bodies. Ironically, due to the nature of Hange's experimentation of them, she treats them as more human than anyone else, recognizing their individuality, and even naming them. As she conducts her experiments, she becomes visibly emotional, seemingly sharing the Titan's pain. Her descriptions of the Titans and the experiments she conducts portray Titans in a different light than the unthinking monsters that many other characters, as well as the audience, are led to believe they are. The Titans are presented as distinct from one another, with differing personalities with much to be uncovered. Isayama highlights how "the Titans showed individual differences," from their physiology to their psychology (Chapter 20). Sonny is even described as "introverted", a uniquely human term.

However, before more could be discovered on the Titans, they were killed, disappearing in a cloud of steam. Though this slightly breaks away from the traditional "escape and reappear" pattern proposed by Cohen, the result is the same: they are monsters that disappear, making understanding them

narratively difficult. The characters within the story struggle to understand—to *categorize*—the Titan, wavering between their conception as unthinking, visceral beings or troubled but conscious, almost-human beings. As Hange says in her experiments, “they don’t need food or water, and even though they have vocal chords it isn’t necessary for them to breathe... all they need is sunlight” (Chapter 20). This statement simultaneously creates similarities and differences with humans, using their body as a medium to highlight this representation.

Right before the deaths of Sonny and Beane were announced, Hange mentions a soldier named Ilse Langnar. Though Hange’s lecture was cut short, Isayama presents us with a chapter dedicated to the tale of Ilse, titled “Ilse’s Notebook”. This story recounts the findings by Ilse Langnar, who was killed by a Titan during the Corps’s 34th expedition beyond the Walls. It opens up with Ilse describing her dire situation; with her soldiers having been devoured and horses lost in Titan-controlled lands, her only option left is to attempt an escape back to the Walls on foot. Even faced with this impossible task, she remarks—by continuously writing in her notebook—that she refuses to give up, and must maintain her will to power through this situation. As she comes to this conclusion, a Titan suddenly appears from in front of her, cutting her thoughts short as she is cornered against a giant tree. Face to face, both human and Titan breathe heavily, seemingly mirroring the other. As she faces what seems like certain death, she continues writing all the while, noting that the Titan does not eat her immediately and may likely be an abnormal Titan.

As she accepts her fate, the Titan, extremely unexpectedly, speaks. It says, in broken fragments, “a subject of Ymir,” before bowing down to her, in what appears to be a sign of respect (Ilse’s Notebook). Ilse, shaken at the fact that a Titan just communicated with her, and even more surprisingly, bowed to her, jumps at the opportunity to pursue further communication with the Titan. She asks about the Titan’s nature, origins, and purpose, ultimately descending into insults and curses on the Titan race, but unfortunately to no avail. As the Titan faces this verbal onslaught, its formerly broken speech reverts back to moans and groans, in what seems to be an internal struggle between human and Titan instincts. The human side yearns to continue the dialogue, to keep its head bowed, to show respect, and to relinquish the Titan side, the side whose tendencies force it to consume humans. The internal struggle becomes external through the Titan’s moans, as its face is overcome with a distraught look, apparent even with its head bowed. Depicted in Figure 3 below, the Titan looks up, tearing its skin away from its face, gritting its giant teeth and staring upwards in a desperate manner, resisting the urge to immediately consume Ilse. Ilse takes this opportunity to try escaping. As the Titan notices, its eyes shift quickly to the fleeing Ilse, finally succumbing to its primal, Titan instincts, chasing her down and consuming her. As it holds Ilse’s limp corpse in its mouth, its face is troubled with an overwhelmingly human expression: distressed, showing almost a sense of regret for its actions. Streams of blood from when it tore its face mimic tears, as Ilse’s notebook, in which she scribbled right until her very final moments, tumbles into the grass.



Fig. 3. Isayama, Hajime, *The Titan's internal struggle*, "Ilse's Notebook", 2011.

This story contains multiple implications. First it emphasizes the exploratory nature of the Scouts and their insistence on uncovering the secrets of the Titans. The panels feature Ilse desperately noting down every moment in her notebook even in her mortally precarious situation. The first attempt she makes at communicating with the Titan is interrogative. In a crescendo of frenzy, she relays the primary lines of inquiry posed by the Survey Corps, putting the quest of discovering the Titans above even her own life. When squad leaders Hange and Levi find the book (and Ilse's armband) a year later, the latter, flipping through the pages of the notebook, says "this is



what Ilse Langnar died for” (Ilse’s Notebook). Secondly, and more importantly, the story goes to great lengths to humanize the Titan. Even considering that the Titans were eventually revealed to formerly be humans, housing their spinal cord in the nape, this is the best example of how a Titan is humanized. The heightened facial expressions conveying uniquely human emotions, its “tears” of blood, its internal struggle made external, all convey a sense of personhood that many other characters, as well as the audience, did not have the opportunity to witness. This contributes heavily to their struggle to categorize the Titan as a humanoid or monstrous entity in the story. As Cohen suggests, the monster eludes more traditional, binary modes of thought, operating outside the bounds of existing categories (Cohen 6). Lastly, though not emphasized textually, the case of the disappearing Titan once again applies here; the Titan escapes yet again, leaving only the material remains of Ilse’s notebook and armband. Its huge body is, once again, nowhere to be found.

The transience of the Titan is the impetus for the difficulty in understanding this Titan Other. Furthermore, in all these instances, its physical escape is marked by its corporeality; that is, the body defines its mystery. The physical body is heavily emphasized; from its disappearance being a literal dissolution of its body to the Corps’ insistence on examining its physical anatomy, the body of the Titan is the stage through which the many mysteries of the world in *Attack on Titan* unfolds. It is a physical escape representative of an epistemological escape. Body and knowledge are one; the revelation of

the Titan body runs alongside the revelation of plot, of culture, and of self. Revelation of the Titan body includes categorization, which only seems to become increasingly complicated as more information on the Titans is revealed. Within the narrative of the story, Titan continues to threaten the border between human and monster, intelligent and unthinking beast. At the same time, the similarities between Titan and human are used as a tool to comment on the nature of humanity. The humongous body of the Titan is the stage for corporeal self-reflection of the humans.

Under Cohen's model, understanding the Titan as a monster is to understand the Titan as a cultural body. He writes, "The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (Cohen 4). With each disappearance and consequent reappearance of the monster, it is slightly different, reflecting the social changes undergone in its absence. With each iteration, it must "be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event" (Cohen 5). In the context of *Attack on Titan*, where the monster is directly linked to the destruction of the world through the Rumbling, we must understand the historical origins for these recurring modes of apocalypse. In other words, the Titan, representing culture, is an allegorical body.



## Mecha and Cultural Conceptions of Technology

Like the Survey Corps, the audience similarly experiences a categorical crisis when faced with the Titan. This crisis, however, is complicated by external references. Unlike the characters within the story, the Titan, in the eyes of the audience, becomes the highly allusory figure that parallels the mecha. Cohen argues that, due to its transient nature, the monstrous body is simultaneously corporeal and incorporeal (Cohen 6). While the Corps struggles with more corporeal issues like the physiological or psychological compositions of the Titan as a corporeal being, the audience deals with the incorporeal struggle of categorizing the Titan as a symbol. We struggle between categorizing it as the organic being it takes the form of, or as the mechanistic being it clearly mimics in following the Japanese manga and anime tradition.

There are many different versions of mecha; they vary in size and complexity, and some (like in the Transformers) have their own consciousness. However, by far the most popular version is the giant, piloted mecha. Various iterations of this come to mind, including the *Gundam* franchise and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. This version of the mecha is also the form that *Attack on Titan* evidently takes after. Mecha is an extremely popular subgenre in Japanese pop culture, with an influence that has expanded beyond its national borders. Franchises like *Transformers* and *Star Wars* draw heavily from mecha, with the former actually being co-founded by Japanese company Takara Tomy. In 2013, Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* became a resounding box office

success, earning over \$400 million worldwide. The film features the Jaegers: giant, humanoid robots created for the sole purpose of defeating colossal, alien monsters called Kaiju. These gigantic Jaegers are piloted by two (regular-sized) people, joined together via a neural link to precisely control the robot's movements. These premises of the film are a clear homage to the Japanese tradition of mecha.

Although people generally consider the first conventional mecha series to be the *Gundam* franchise (1979), the ideological inspirations for the genre have been around for decades prior. Mecha places technological advancement at the forefront of the audience's focus: it is at once the object of technological desire and the result of scientific insecurity. Susan J. Napier argues, mechas are very masculinized figures, built principally for the purposes of war, with emphasis on "thrusting" and "penetrating" behaviors (Napier 87). Additionally, the mecha is a highly marketable figure, with its origins in partnerships with toy companies, some of which sport hundreds of different models. With advanced cities with towering skyscrapers and giant, hyper-mobile machines with equally giant weapons that shoot beams, it should come with no surprise that the technology featured in mecha works is met with adulation. Technology is featured as the great desire of the future: humanity's triumph over originally greater forces like monsters and nature. On a cultural level, as well as to a younger, simpler audience, technology is seen as the hallmark of a successful nation.

However, to a more mature audience, most mecha works evidently contain a more ominous subtext, implying some sort of duplicity within the mecha. Portrayals of technology in Japanese pop culture are rather ambivalent. Manga and anime, especially the subgenre of mecha, is permeated by the theme of apocalypse (Napier 193). The apocalyptic mode, as manifested towards a cultural ambivalence towards the idea of technology, is somewhat of an object of fascination in Japanese media. Of course, an aversion to modern technology and the horrors it has brought is most definitely not exclusive to Japanese culture. Nonetheless, the extent and notoriety of technological incidents weighs particularly heavily in their history. Prewar Japan had already exhibited a skeptical attitude towards machines. Miri Nakamura makes note of this in her essay “Horror and Machines in Prewar Japan”, quoting scholar Mizushima Niou:

Machines and technology in prewar Japan, however, did not simply represent social progress; they also were associated with fear and degeneration. In the words of one scholar, prewar literature depicting machines was in “a constant flux between a utopian dream of machines on the one hand and a pessimistic nightmare of them on the other” (Nakamura 3).

Napier notes that most notably, of course, are the atomic bombings of World War II, which, like many of the technological weapons featured in the mecha genre, destroyed human life in the hundreds of thousands, an unprecedented scale of destruction (Napier 194). The aesthetic of the atomic bombs, their explosion, and the aftermath is very much present in the greater category of manga and anime, but even more pronounced in the mecha subgenre. *Attack on Titan*, of course, is no exception. Specifically, the Colossus

Titan is referred to simply as a “god of destruction”, utilized in war essentially as a nuclear bomb, activated upon transformation. The aesthetic of the transformation is immediately reminiscent of a nuclear bomb as well, with several panels dedicated specifically to the flash, shockwave, and most importantly, the subsequent mushroom cloud that has so defined the aesthetic of nuclear explosions in popular media.

The ambivalence of the mecha genre is reflected in the mecha technology itself. Technology is simultaneously the guardian from apocalypse as well as the catalyst for destruction. This becomes evident in most mecha clashes: the gigantism of the mecha figures, though they may guard against some sort of greater threat to humanity, necessarily leads to immense destruction of the place they are trying to protect. Furthermore, piloted mecha, in particular, is a uniquely dualistic existence, composed of two oppositional bodies: the human, almost always an adolescent pilot, and the mecha: a giant machine. Fittingly, many mecha works (*Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *RahXephon* come to mind here) feature the pilot standing directly face to face with the mecha. This is quite a powerful narrative tool, in which the technological body of the mecha is used as a site of discourse between two oppositional forces: human and machine, organic and inorganic, good and evil, and on a broader scale, known and unknown (Lunning 271). The mecha is the muse, the pilot the interlocutor; to understand the mecha is to understand oneself. This is well represented in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, where the main character Shinji, an adolescent boy, faces EVA Unit-01, in this

case primarily symbolic of his mountain of childhood trauma and by extension, the psychology of himself which he remains unfamiliar with (Fig. 4). In this sense, the mecha is regarded with a sense of Otherness.



Fig. 4. Anno, Hideaki. Shinji, face to face with Unit-01, Season 1 Episode 1, 1995.

### **Titans as Ambivalent Technology**

The similarities between the Titans and the mecha are already quite apparent through the piloting and gigantism of the Titans. I argue that the comparison of the Titans to the mecha is a means to the greater end of representing the Titans as technology. The allegorical nature of the Titan in (reference to the mecha) is only significant because of what the mecha represents. As stated earlier, mecha is, first and foremost, to be understood as a representation of technology, simultaneously invoking themes of development and destruction, both being processes for which technology is a central catalyst. Furthermore, even aside from the Titan's overt aesthetic similarities to the mecha, they are represented as technology in multiple different ways. They are manifested both as destructive technology and developmental technology, a very deliberate dichotomy that similarly mirrors the ambivalence created through the mecha genre. Isayama accomplishes this in many different ways, with their narrative placement, aesthetic, and naming convention all reflecting technology in some sort of way.

The most obvious way the Titans reflect technology is through the way they are utilized in war. Marley's utilization of the Titans is the most obvious. The Marleyan military is centered around the Titans; much like a mantra, they repeatedly tout the power of the Titans, so much so that their more conventional technological advancements fall short compared to other nations. There are several units in the military dedicated to harnessing the Power of the Titans, including the Eldian Unit and the Warrior Unit.

The Battle of Fort Slava, in Chapter 92, features an airborne attack on a fort utilizing Titans. Eldians are parachuted off a plane, then forced to transform through Zeke's scream (Fig. 5). They transform in midair, falling onto the fort in a huge wave of destruction. This is heavily reminiscent of airborne bombings used in the mid-20th century, particularly during World War II; the attack is even described as a "kinetic bombardment" by Reiner, one of the Warriors (Chapter 92). The Eldians, while on the plane and leading up to their transformation, are completely sedated. Unconscious and tied up, they wield no will of their own. Even as Titans, they follow only their primal instincts, destroying the infrastructure where they walk and eating the humans the way they are designed to do. As such, they quite literally are war technology. Pure Titans on Paradis are generally regarded, at least by Marley, in non-human military terms: in one case, they describe them as deterrents against an invasion on Paradis. They are never regarded as former Eldians, much less former humans.

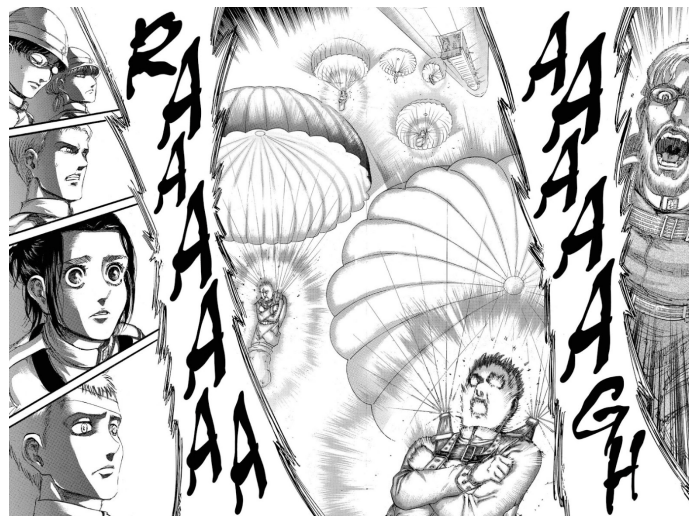


Fig. 5. Isayama, Hajime, Eldians forced to transform for aerial attack, Chapter 92, 2017.

Aside from the Pure Titans, the Nine Titans are even more heavily representative of technology. Their names and nicknames are very telling. Take the Armored Titan for instance: it's directly named after a piece of war-based technology. Furthermore, the Armored is frequently addressed as the "Shield of Marley". Its counterpart, the Beast Titan, is addressed as a "Spear" (Chapter 92). Take into account its ability as well; specializing in projectile warfare, it's used like a cannon, taking out multiple Scout troops in the Battle of Shiganshina on Paradis Island, as well as the East Allied Fleet to conclude the Battle of Fort Slava. The Colossus Titan is, as stated previously, described as a "god of destruction", mimicking the aesthetic of a nuclear weapon (Fig. 6). The Cart Titan follows this pattern as well, having a military unit (Panzer Unit) dedicated specifically to fight alongside it. Of course, several of these Titans embody the theme of technological ambivalence. For instance, the Armored Titan, while protective in nature, is ironically a heavily offensive force. As a representation of the mecha, it is not immune to the theme of "penetration"; in fact, the second wall breach in the opening sequence was caused by the Armored Titan. The Cart Titan also exhibits ambivalence through its usage and the technology it takes after. As a cart, it is perhaps one of the most instrumental developments in human history, used to carry large quantities of items around, which could be used for development, commerce, or personal use. However, it aids heavily in wartime purposes, contributing to the destruction caused by war as well. The Titan's role embodies this; though it has been used as a cart, transporting materials from point A to point B, it is



also designed to carry heavy artillery, as seen first in the Battle of Fort Slava and multiple engagements going forward.



Fig. 6. Isayama, Hajime, Colossus Titan's explosion, Chapter 78, 2016.

Perhaps the most compelling incarnation of ambivalence in a Titan is the War Hammer Titan. Introduced relatively late into the story, the War Hammer Titan possesses the unique ability to create and manipulate structures made out of Titan hardening (Chapter 101). This ability was used to create weapons like crossbows, spikes, broadswords, and of course, the war hammer it takes its name after. For these reasons, the War Hammer Titan is

defined by its synthesis; after all, even its Titan form is nothing more than a body synthesized by its user. The crux of its ability is dissonant with its intentions; defined by its ability to synthesize weapons, it creates only to destroy, to subdue, to kill. Out of the plethora of structures created by the War Hammer, not one is used for nonviolent purposes. We can further conceptualize this ambivalence by reading this Titan as an allegory for military industrialization. The pattern runs the same: mass production and synthesis for the purpose of mass destruction.

The Wall Titans in particular embody the ambivalent spirit of technology as well. A century prior to the events of the main storyline, they were created at the behest of the Eldian king Karl Fritz, who grew tired of the violence and oppression the Eldian empire put people through. Unable to bear the weight of his predecessor's actions, he created the Wall Titans, subsequently organizing them into the Walls that caged in the people of Paradis at the start of the story. Walls are defensive technology: for the people of Paradis, they served as the last defensive stand against the Titans, who had, according to the version of history they were led to believe, consumed the rest of humanity. In the sociopolitical context of their real world, the walls served as the shield from the other nations of the world, especially Marley, which were hungry for the rich resources that the island housed. Simultaneously however, the Walls housed the Wall Titans, which were supposedly able to be utilized as a weapon against the rest of the world in an apocalyptic fashion. The threat of the Rumbling was ultimately realized through the actions of Eren.

The usability of the Wall Titans (and by extension, the Founding Titan's power) is central to the narrative, and to this point as well. The ability of the Founder is only conditionally available, requiring someone with royal blood to use the ability. Simultaneously however, if someone with royal blood were to acquire the Founding Titan, they would be bound by the ideals of their predecessors per the "Vow Renouncing War", prohibiting them from starting the Rumbling. The restriction of the Founding Titan's power to specifically individuals with royal blood comments on the access of technology. Though not in such strict terms, technology is, like most other commodities, distributed unequally. Various factors can prevent the less fortunate from using it, including financial instability, physical inability, or technological illiteracy. At the same time, the Vow Renouncing War speaks to the impact that ideology has over the usage of technology. Eren, an individual lacking royal blood, is ultimately able to get in contact with his half-brother, Zeke Yeager, who does possess royal blood. As a result, Eren is placed in the uniquely privileged position of being able to utilize the Founding Titan's power without the Vow Renouncing War hindering him. As a result, he unleashes the Rumbling.

Eren's use of the Rumbling compared to the inaction, (whether deliberate or not), of the previous holders of the Founding Titan, demonstrates just how drastically the user and their ideals impacts the existence of the same technology. The Walls' existence as defensive technology stood firm for a century before the Founder was usurped by Eren. With Eren's activation of

the Rumbling, the exact same Walls become spear rather than shield, offensive rather than defensive, destructive rather than developmental (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Isayama, Hajime, The Walls come down, Chapter 122, 2019.

## Violence

Around the same time, the beginning of the Titans is revealed. The first Titan was a girl named Ymir Fritz, (distinct from the Ymir named earlier), who lived 2000 years before the events of the main plotline. The story of Ymir emphasizes technology, both developmental and destructive, and raises important questions about the culpability of utilizing technology.

Ymir Fritz was a young girl, enslaved by Eldia, which was but a tribe at that time. As punishment for allowing some of the livestock to escape, she was to be hunted down for sport. As she fled from her pursuers, badly wounded, she sought shelter inside a giant tree with an opening at its base. As she enters, she slips into a chasm within the tree, eventually falling into what seemed to be a lake deep underground. A mysterious spine-like creature, dubbed "Something" throughout the course of the story, connected with her, granted her the Power of the Titans, compelling her to transform into the first Titan. Her Titan was enormous, around four times as tall as the Colossus Titan. However, even with this devastating power, Ymir clung onto her devotion to the king, returning to serve the very master that cast her out to be hunted down. With her power, she served Eldia, taking down its many enemies, including Marley (then a tribe as well), in a brutal struggle for power. Though her tenure was short lived, eventually dying to save her ruler, her feats began the cycle of oppression that kept Eldia in power for nearly the next two millenia.

Ymir is, first and foremost, the principal representation of technology in *Attack of Titan*. As the Founding Titan, she was a combination of all the Nine Titans. In the context of her world, she is the very weapon that was used to conquer all of humanity. But what stands out in the case of Ymir is that her Titan is one of the only ones whose developmental capabilities were emphasized. The primary examples of synthesis that we have seen thus far—the War Hammer Titan and the Wall Titans—were still inevitably, directly tied to destruction, or at the very least, military purposes. Ymir, on the other hand, seemingly encapsulated some of the less violent parts of technology. In the words of the ruler, Ymir “built the roads, cultivated the lands, and made bridges between the mountains” (Chapter 122). Ymir became the emblem of technological growth, playing the foundational role in the making of the modern world of *Attack of Titan*, giving rise to the Titans, the nations, and the technology and developments of the world.

As to be expected however, this is no celebration of the development that Ymir caused as a representation of technology. Any form of technological development is immediately subverted by some form of violence that either enables or is enabled by it. After all, the very root of Ymir’s gaining of the Power of the Titans was enabled by violent struggle for survival, a human being hunted by other humans. Similarly, Ymir’s developmental achievements—cultivating lands and building bridges—is only enabled through the violence she, as well as other people in the Eldian tribe, inflict upon others. The ruler’s commendation of her developmental feats is furthermore,

immediately followed by his commands to “annihilate the hated people of Marley” (Chapter 122). The following panels, as shown below in Figure 8, all distinctly lack any dialogue, showcasing, in collage-like fashion, the destruction of the other nations, the development of the Eldian armies, and the construction of large structures and cities, all alongside each other. Here, development is juxtaposed immediately with destruction, and life with death. There is no development, no technology, without violence.

This idea is further supported by the first chronological instance of cannibalism in the story. When Ymir died 13 years after she first transformed, the ruler was extremely intent on preserving the Power of the Titans within the Eldian tribe. In an extremely grotesque scene, he compels his three daughters (whom he had with Ymir) to cannibalize Ymir’s corpse. Through this act, the Power of the Titans was ultimately passed on through the generations of the Eldian population, eventually splitting into what we now know as the Nine Titans. The passing down of these abilities, which have been established as representations of technology, are enabled only through the act of bodily consumption, a uniquely grotesque, violent act. This pattern persists into the primary plotline, wherein Titan powers are gained through consumption of the Titan user’s body. Even putting aside the allegorical nature of the Titans, the more concrete forms of technology that *Attack on Titan* showcases—for instance the ODM (omni-directional mobility) gear, anti-Titan artillery, and other military technology—are all created in response to other developments



or threats. In every case, the attaining of technological power is both driven by and the source of violence.

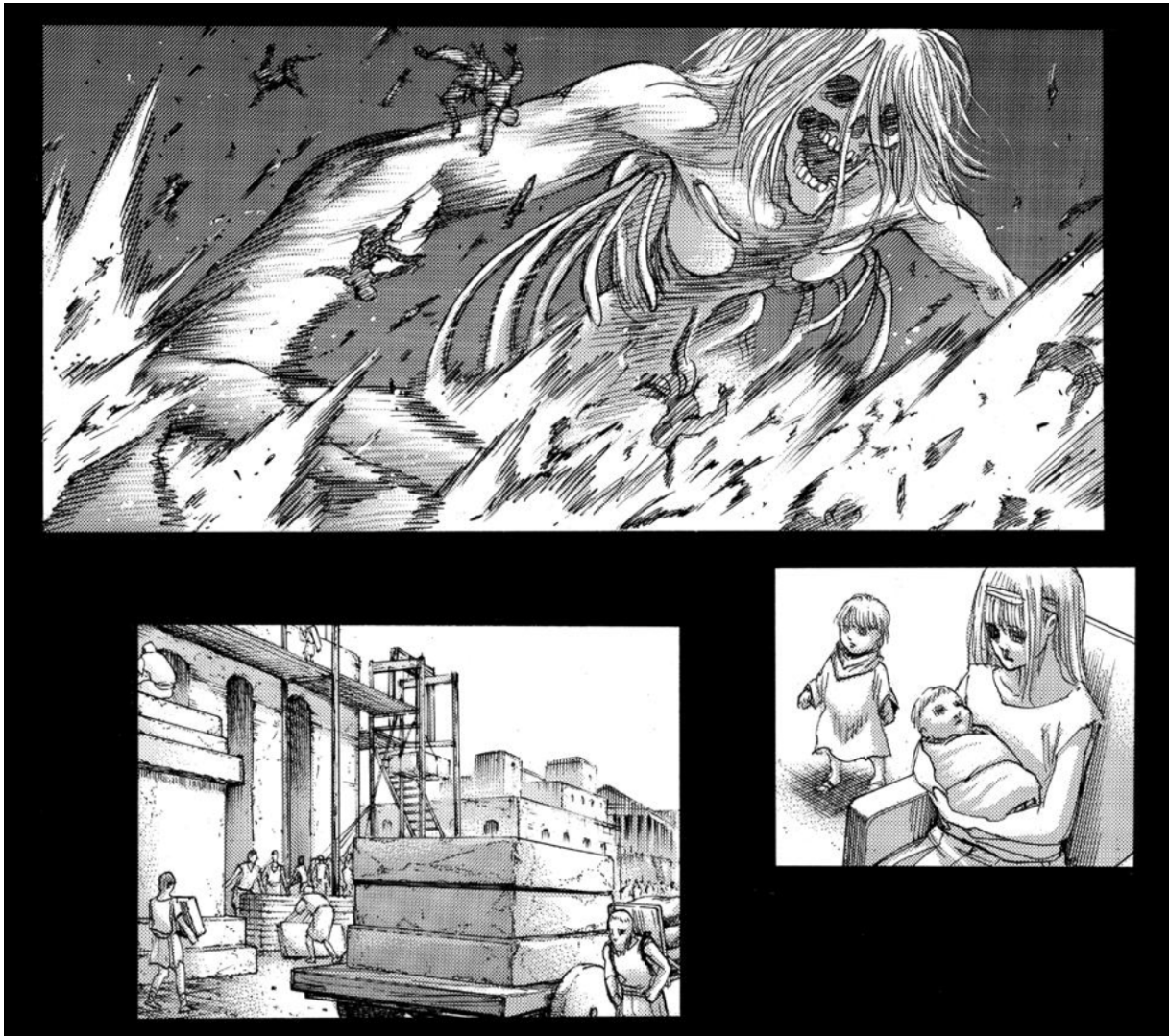


Fig. 8. Isayama, Hajime, Juxtaposition of destruction and development, Chapter 122, 2019.



## Desire and Succession

The Titans, their gigantism, as well as their connection to military technology, necessitates a discourse on power. Technology is power manifested in different ways: military technology represents physical power, while others can represent a more epistemological power. Of course, there are various instances in which these forms of power intersect with one another. Taking this idea into account, Isayama's discourse of technology can be read, again, as a representation of power. In *Attack on Titan*, power is constantly being transferred, manifested chiefly through the Titans. This pattern, of course, takes after the mecha. As Frenchy Lunning points out, mecha is a manifestation of power: it is the vehicle through which the pilot's desires may become realized (Lunning 269). Consider the demographic of mecha pilots; they are, almost without exception, an immature entity. As Lunning also points out, in the mecha genre, the pilots are almost always adolescent, sometimes female, (in which case it is almost always conceptualized as a female desire for possession of a male body, as evidenced by the masculine form of the mecha), sometimes physically incapacitated. For the Titans, in every case, they fulfill some desire: desire for social status, desire to please the parent. More importantly, through the technological lens, it fulfills the desire to fight against giant monsters, desire to climb over walls, desire to save humanity, and ultimately, desire for power.

In the case of Eldians in Marley, the ability to transform into a Titan is earned through their trials as a participant in the Warrior program, a process

which eventually grants them the title of “Honorary Marleyan”. Most of the children—while knowing the benefits that being an Honorary Marleyan can bring—participate out of a desire to satisfy their parents. Many of the Warrior candidates’ stories are explored at length. Before realizing the implications of his actions, Annie’s father violently drilled martial arts into her in hopes that she would be physically capable. Consequently, while Annie’s Titan indeed allows her to achieve incredible physical capabilities, it also, more importantly, fulfills her desire to grant her father’s wishes. Likewise, Zeke underwent heavy psychological abuse at the hands of his father while attempting to win the Beast Titan. With his biological father acting this way, it should come as no surprise that Zeke’s other father figure, Tom Ksaver, is the Beast Titan at the time, thus fulfilling his desire for a father figure. Zeke, in turn, fulfills Ksaver’s desire for a son, after losing his original child from a murder-suicide by his Marleyan wife, after discovering that he was an Eldian.

*Attack on Titan*, for the people on Paradis Island, is defined by the desires of certain characters, past or present. Eren and Armin repeatedly express their desire to see the different parts of the world that they do not have access to on Paradis Island. In Armin’s words, “far beyond these walls, there's flaming water, land made of ice, and fields of sand spread wide. It's the world my parents wanted to go to” (Chapter 2). These desires, of course, are representative of a larger desire. Consider the opening sentences of the series: “That day, the human race remembered... the terror of being dominated by them... and the shame of being held captive in a birdcage” (Chapter 1). This

statement conveys two desires: the desire to be free from the domination of the Titans, and the desire to be able to break out of the birdcage. These two goals are not separate by any means: the power to attain freedom is the central desire of Eren, as well as the other inhabitants of Paradis, and freedom is obtained by destroying the Titans (exercising power).

Like the mecha, every Titan is birthed out of desire. On a broad scale, as previously discussed, each of the Titan's manifestations as technology represents some sort of human desire which technology is able to alleviate: the desire to conquer, to protect, to transport, so on and so forth. Furthermore, each of the Nine Titans, when transferred, is distinct from the last. In some form or another, the characteristics of the Titan are reflective of the user. Their desires play an especially poignant role in the way their Titan is manifested. As discussed, the first Titan—Ymir's Founding Titan—was born out of her desire to survive and her desire to, in turn, serve her king's desires of conquest. The most visually obvious example is Falco's Jaw Titan. Falco is introduced through the first-person perspective. Lying injured on the battlefield, he reaches his hand out to the sky at a bird, asking it to fly away from the danger. Ultimately, several chapters later, after Falco inherits the Jaw Titan, he transforms in order to protect his comrades from attackers, revealing his ability to fly, one unseen in any other Titan. Falco's Titan's ability of flight also runs parallel to the motif of wings and their representation of freedom. The Scout Regiment's emblem is known as the "Wings of Freedom". For the various conceptions of the desire for freedom, the Titans are the agents that

make it possible: the desire to fight the Titan, the desire to be the Titan, to break free from the walls, to be one with the outside world, to save the island. In every case, gaining access to the Power of the Titans is what fulfills this desire for power.

Titan shifters gain their powers by devouring, consuming the human bodies of their predecessors. This pattern, of course, originated in the first act of consumption previously mentioned: Ymir's daughters' consumption of her body. Due to the disturbing nature of the panel in question, Figure 9, shown below, only shows the king's command to consume her body. The depiction of this scene is especially grotesque, with the Eldian king using a large cleaver to butcher his mistress's body before forcing their children to devour the body. The motif of consumption in *Attack on Titan* is distinctly Bakhtinian, beckoning to his idea of the carnival. Within the carnival, the corporeal is celebrated. The process of change is invited, and the site of the carnival becomes a site of rebirth where opposites meet and boundaries are torn down. As Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth" (Bakhtin 125).

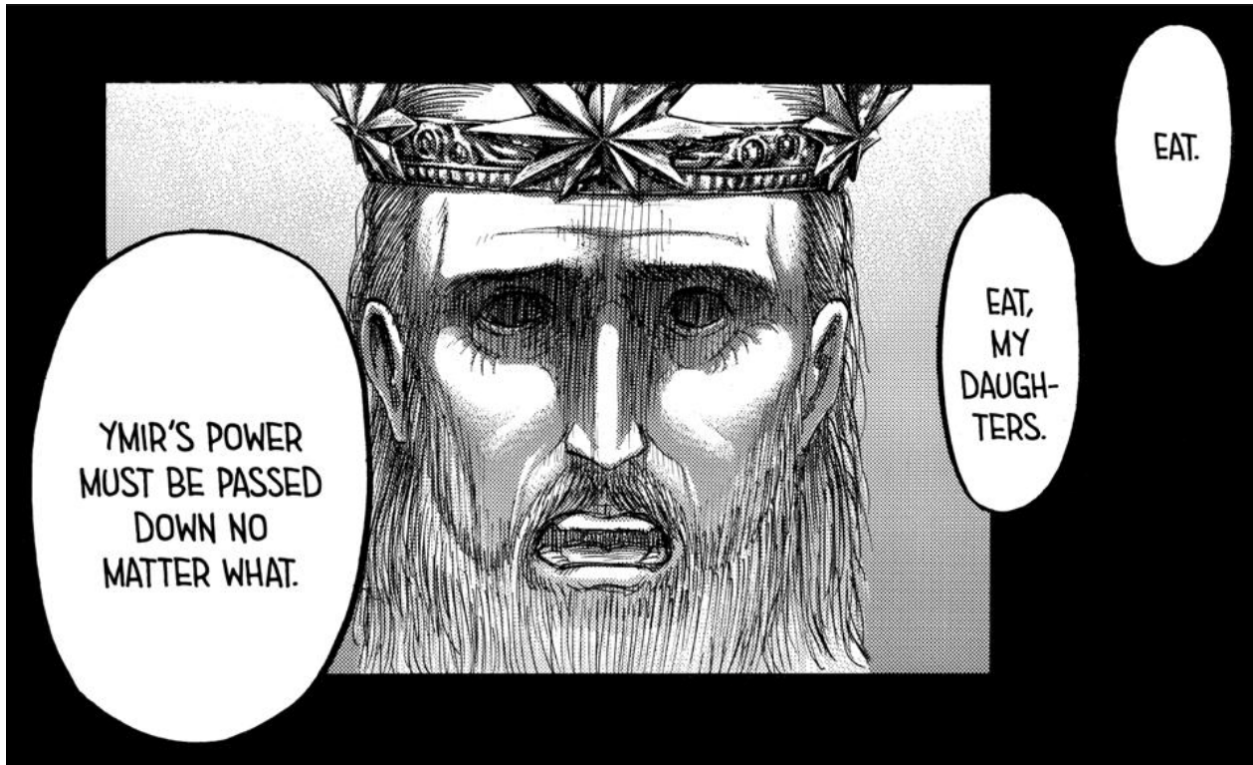


Fig. 9. Isayama, Hajime, *Succession through consumption*, Chapter 122, 2019.

Admittedly however, the carnivalesque imagery present in *Attack on Titan* does not come with some of the more celebratory aspects associated with Bakhtin's carnival. Consumption in *Attack on Titan* is a capitalistic endeavor: the consumed object in the story is almost always human, resulting in their death. Most of the transfers of Titan powers as shown in the story are done through battle. For instance, Armin gained the power of the Colossus Titan from Bertholdt through the Battle of Shiganshina District; Falco's Titan was gained through his consumption of Porco Galliard in battle. Additionally, Eren gained the power of the War Hammer Titan in the Battle of Liberio. However, in the history of the world of *Attack on Titan*, the passing down of the Titan powers became much more organized, eventually turning into a ritual

where the predecessor is chained, seemingly voluntarily, before being consumed by the selected successor. Nonetheless, the transfer of power through consumption remains a fundamentally violent process. The vast majority of panels showcasing this transfer of power are portrayed as awfully gory, sometimes switching into the perspective of the predecessor getting devoured. Blood splatters all over the immediate environment, as the Titan engulfs the former shifter with a satiated gulp. In *Attack on Titan*, power is always gained through violence. Another way this can be conceptualized is through the process of a Titan shifter's transformation. Coupled with a strong will and a clear desire, the primary action that a shifter must take in order to transform is the act of self-harm. There is an emphasis on blood, and by extension, violence, in the act of transformation; most shifters bite their hand, others use a sharp object like a knife or special ring, while others have taken advantage of being hurt in battle in order to transform.

The tradition of violence and bodily harm as a means of succession and growth can be further explored in the mythological influences that helped build the Titans. Two specific mythological traditions are invoked. First, the Founder being named Ymir invokes the Norse mythological tradition, as it is also one of the names of the jötnar, commonly referred to as giants. Secondly, Greek mythological influences are apparent as well, as Titans are a notable figure in the mythological tradition. Both mythologies share a foundational story involving titans (or giants), and both stories are defined by their grotesque, violent elements.

In Norse mythology, Ymir, also known as Aurgelmir, is the first jötunn, often conceptualized as the giants. Ymir and his children predated the Norse gods; he was nourished by the primeval cow Audumla, who in turn paved the way for the rise of the gods by freeing Buri, the first god. Buri had three grandchildren: Odin, Vili, and Vé, which ultimately led to the gods' succession to the top. In a uniquely violent scene, the three grandchildren of Buri killed Ymir the jötunn, and used his flesh to create the world. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, the third poem in the *Poetic Edda*, as translated by Benjamin Thorpe, the jötunn Vafþrúðnir testifies, "From Ymir's flesh the earth was formed, and from his bones the hills, the heaven from the skull of that ice-cold giant, and from his blood the sea" (Thorpe 12). This story takes after the crucial pattern that *Attack on Titan* follows: development, or rather the creation of the world itself in the case of Norse Mythology, is possible only through the violent act of killing, an act that yields a world made directly from the body of the victim. This story links flesh with creation, something similarly mirrored by the ability of Titan hardening in *Attack on Titan*, used by the Attack Titan, the War Hammer Titan, and the Wall Titans to specifically construct and synthesize certain structures.

The Greek mythological tradition, as told by Hesiod's *Theogony*, portrays a mode of violence more closely related to the theme of succession. Succession is a frequent theme in the mythology; Zeus overthrew his father Cronus in a great war (Hesiod 68). In several other accounts, he either castrated him, or cut him up before banishing him to Tartarus. He

subsequently became the king of the gods. Cronus, Zeus's father, achieved power in a similar way, castrating and overthrowing his father Uranus (Hesiod 38). The theme of creation is not absent from the Greek tradition; Uranus's blood produced the Gigantes, Erinyes, and Meliae, and his testicles, thrown out into the sea, produced Aphrodite (Hesiod 39). Bodily suppression is further seen in Cronus's actions; after receiving a prophecy that his power will ultimately similarly come undone by the hands of his children, he engulfs his children (save for Zeus, who managed to avoid this). Aside from the obvious similarity—a Titan cannibalizing human (or at least human-like) beings—Cronus performs this act in an effort to preserve his power. In these scenes of creation and succession, power is created and transferred in an incredibly obscene, grotesque manner that, like the Norse tradition, mirrors the patterns evidenced in *Attack on Titan*. The emphasis on the corporeal realm, bodily violence, and their affinity to creation and development, succession, and the transfer of power all comment that power and violence are necessarily connected.

Using this lens, we can examine the act of consumption in *Attack on Titan*. Cannibalism, as shown, is tied heavily to the transfer of power, even in works beyond mythological traditions. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, showcases Pecola Breedlove eating Mary Jane candies, a figurative cannibalism of the white body, and by extension, an exercise of power over the white body. Barbara Hill Rigney conceptualizes this as “a cannibal feast as she gorges herself on the body of the enemy in order to assume its power” (Rigney



85). Morrison herself writes, “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (Morrison 50). This pattern directly mirrors the transfer of Titan powers in *Attack on Titan*: a uniquely violent, grotesque act, where what Morrison presents figuratively is made literal by Isayama. The shifters eat a Titan (at least, a Titan shifter) to become the Titan. The representation can be read alongside critiques of capitalism and some tenets of postcolonial theory: the violence—the forcible suppression of upward mobility to the oppressed masses—is made literal, with the corporeal realm—the body—utilized as a medium.

### **Apocalypse in *Attack on Titan***

*Attack on Titan*, taking after many other mecha works, is defined by the theme of apocalypse. Conceptualized as the Rumbling, the reader, along with many of the characters within the story itself, are left questioning whether or not it will truly take place, or if something like that could even take place. Nonetheless, the threat of a Rumbling that will destroy the world looms ever so presently in the story. All that is known about the Rumbling is what the former king of Paradis, Karl Fritz, said before erecting the three walls around Paradis: “If you ever try to interfere with our affairs, the tens of millions of Titans that sleep inside the walls will surely flatten the entire earth” (Chapter 86). The Rumbling, evidently *Attack on Titan*’s most devastating weapon, is a straightforward allegory for the possibility of an all-out nuclear war. All-out nuclear war follows a similar pattern; there is no question on the power of such an attack and the destruction that it would wreak. However, they share many similar points of contention, asking questions concerning whether or not it will truly happen, and how humanity (and the rest of the world) could potentially recover from this. Mecha works always see the mecha, or at least some form of technology (usually nuclear weapons or some stand in, i.e. the F.L.E.I.J.A. in *Code Geass*) as the agent of destruction in the apocalypse. The Rumbling is no different: the destruction is executed by *Attack on Titan*’s representation of mecha and technology: the Titans.

Napier makes an interesting note on the apocalyptic mode in Japanese media. The theme of apocalypse can be further conceptualized with Napier’s

clarification on its definition; apocalypse is more than a simple threat of global destruction: it is Revelation (Napier 194). Paralleled with the biblical sense of the term, the Revelation entails both a world-ending conflict between good and evil, as well as a more typical sense of “revelation”. It represents a mass discovery, or revelation, on the mysteries of the world: mysteries of truth, of the good and bad, and most importantly, mysteries on how the revelation is to happen. In the context of manga and anime, Napier states, “much of the narrative tension is not from ‘waiting for the end of the world’ but from the revelation of how and why the world should end” (Napier 252). The Revelation is a “final, world-destroying conflict between good and evil” (Napier 196).

*Attack on Titan*, like many of the mecha works that it takes after, follows this pattern. The many doubts and questions that the reader (as well as many of the characters within the story) have about the apocalypse, like whether or not it truly could happen, or how it would happen, are all unfortunately put to rest by the fact that the story indeed culminates in the devastating Rumbling. The results are reminiscent of some predictions on how an all-out nuclear war can turn out. After Eren, using his Founding Titan’s ability, undoes all Titan hardening to release the Titans within the walls, the millions of colossal Wall Titans begin their advance on the rest of the world, walking and destroying everything under their feet. They begin on Paradis Island, swimming through the ocean and breaking through the rest of the world’s military defense. During the final battle, known as the Battle of Heaven and Earth, the Rumbling is finally put to a halt, but not before the vast majority of the world had

already been trampled. In Bakhtinian fashion, with utter disregard to race, gender, age, or class, 80 percent of humanity was ultimately killed in the Rumbling; lines and boundaries are blurred. (Of course, this mode is present all throughout *Attack on Titan*, with its emphasis on consumption and the orifices.)

To reiterate, the apocalyptic mode is very present in the mecha subgenre. Other non-mecha works, such as Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (though it is heavily technologically based), see a similar pattern. In *Akira*, the cause of destruction is the psychic power of certain humans, which are conflated aesthetically with nuclear war as a result of the misuse of technology. Though there are many different iterations of these calamities, the theme of technological abuse is central to the apocalyptic mode. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is a very compelling example. Both follow a similar logic: the apocalypse was an intentional occurrence, caused by a specific character (or characters) within the narrative in order to bring about some sort of "peace". For *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, it is to bring about the existence of a unified consciousness. For *Attack on Titan*, Eren's goal was to save the people of Paradis Island through the Rumbling, eliminating the possibility for war. The Rumbling is the final stage where all distinctions are erased, both ideologically and visually: the effect of the Rumbling is a flattened space with no life, no vegetation, no up or down (Fig. 10). It is effectively a tabula rasa from which humanity can rise again. Within this battle, these dichotomies are made clear. Even the title of the battle itself showcases a binary: "The Battle of Heaven

and Earth". In both *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and in *Attack on Titan*, these goals both involve the destruction of boundaries presented alongside the destruction of the world. The former focuses on the destruction of individual identity to create the collective consciousness, while the latter focuses on the destruction of national identity to create a peaceful world. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* directly uses technology as a catalyst for the apocalypse, and *Attack on Titan* uses a representation of the mecha form (the Titans) to bring about the Rumbling.

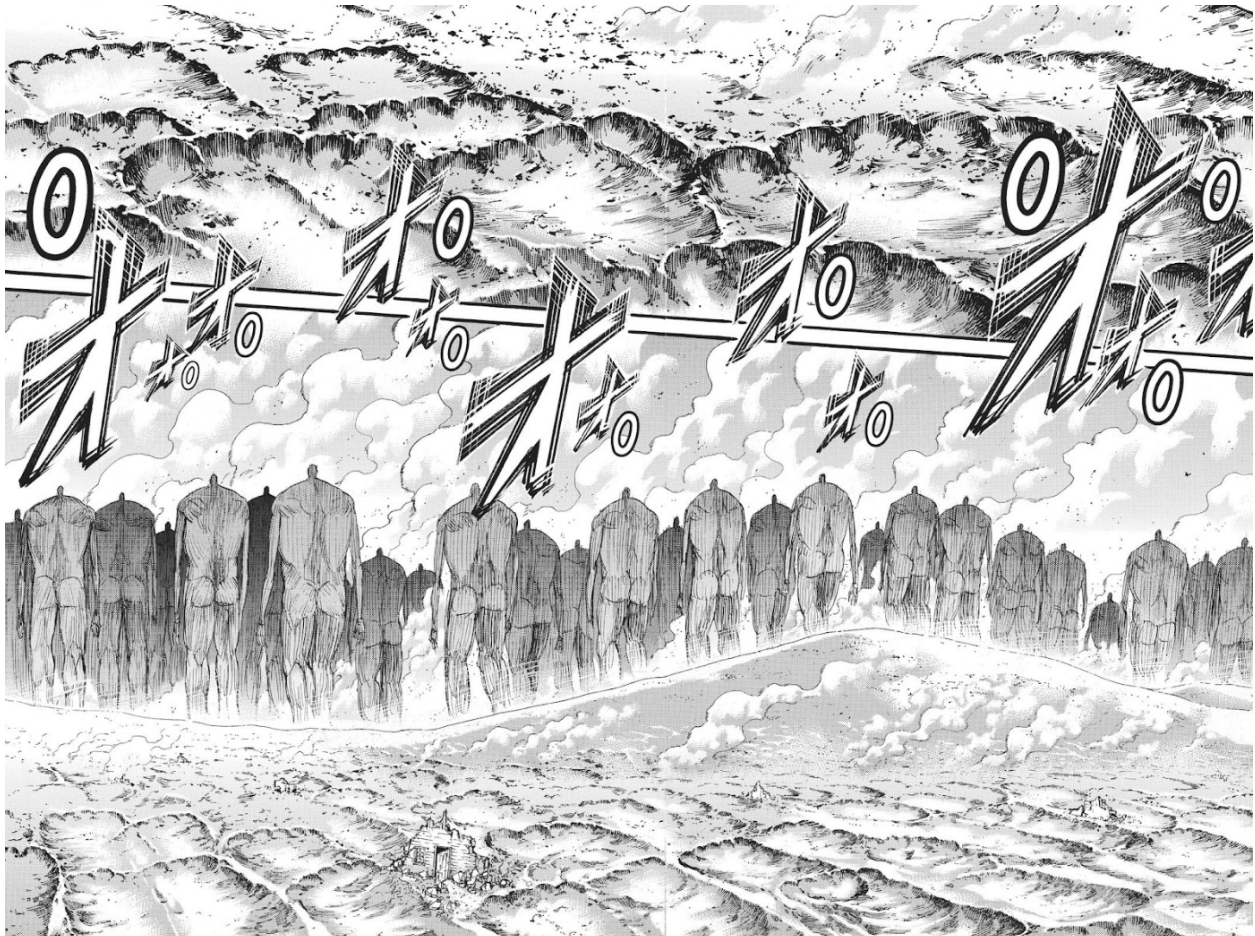


Fig. 10. The Rumbling flattens the world, Chapter 131, 2020

*Attack on Titan* is most definitely not the only manga or anime to emphasize the human role in technology through a mecha, or at least quasi-mecha framework. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* explores this extensively, with the mecha ultimately being revealed to be organic beings in their own right. More importantly, however, is the connection established between mecha and pilot. To restate, the mecha is a dual-body, where the human pilot is connected, typically via a neural link to the machine. For critic Christopher Bolton, the degree of connection between the pilot and the machine, between human and technology, is an important factor in this discourse. As he states, though technological mecha may establish a link and take on a humanoid shape, they “are ultimately distinct from their pilots, mobile suits that the humans can take off at the end of the day” (Bolton 125).

However, In giving his representation of mecha a distinctly human, organic form, Isayama effectively removes the gap between human and mecha. The connection between human to Titan is much more intense; while most mecha works typically showcase the pilot sitting in some sort of cockpit, surrounded by various buttons and controls, the users of each of the Nine Titans are physically connected, in both flesh and mind. This bears similarities to Donna Haraway’s conception of the cyborg. Cyborgs are typically defined by the inseparability between organic and inorganic; the machine parts are easily viewed as an extension of the human body. Haraway rejects the boundaries between human and animal, and subsequently “animal-human” (or organism) and machine. She writes, “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we

ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway 11). Upon transformation, the user is connected to their respective Titan with several stretches of flesh in various parts of their body, including parts of their face, neck, and limbs. The Pure Titans embody this connection as well, perhaps even more strongly. The weak area in the nape of the Pure Titans is revealed to not contain any body; rather, the story implies that the 1-meter weak spot contains the spinal cord of the person that the Titan formerly was, being fully absorbed into the Titan. The connection places a heavy emphasis on the corporeal once again, with a flesh-to-flesh union that is uniquely intimate and rarely seen in other mecha works. Bolton notes that a defining trait of many mecha is a sense of claustrophobia: a fear that the pilot will not be able to leave the machine. He conceptualizes the loss of power or control over the machine as a full sensory deprivation: an amputation of self from reality. Thus, both Titan and mecha are indeed the Others of the human. However, while traditional mecha typically focuses on the creation of difference, the Titan removes the apparent gap between these two seemingly distinct parties. Human and Titan are one, manifesting a creation of sameness through apparent differences.

The Titans unleashed during the Rumbling are depicted on the cover of the 31st volume, shown in Figure 11. Eren’s Founding Titans looms in the rear end of what seems to be an endless sea of Titans. The Titans each vary ever so slightly in height, but all wear a distinct, uniquely human expression, much like the Pure Titans throughout the rest of the story. A few are emotionless, one has a chilling grin, one has its eyes wide open while baring its teeth. After

the Wall Titans leave Paradis Island, they make their way towards the Marleyan mainland. They cross the sea swiftly, swimming past and disintegrating the giant naval blockade assembled for the sole purpose of stopping the Rumbling in its tracks. The perspective shifts quickly to the soldiers standing at the shore, manning their comparably small weapons fearfully, recognizing that the giant clouds of steam surrounding the Titans continued to loom ever so closely. The cloud of steam gets terrifyingly close to the harbor until finally, the silhouettes of the giant human-like figures become clearer and clearer. The next panel showcases the Titans, in what seems like a never-ending line going all the way back to the horizon, rising up from the sea. As the soldiers see that their artillery has no effect, they begin abandoning their posts, running away hopelessly. These few panels are incredibly surreal, portraying the (human) soldiers in the foreground, with the Titans—almost human in form—far off into the background, but almost the same size as the soldiers on the paper (Fig. 12). As they always have been, the Titans continue to be presented as somewhat human.





Fig. 11. Isayama, Hajime, The expressions of the Wall Titans, Volume 31, 2020.



Fig. 12. Isayama, Hajime, The Rumbling approaches the mainland Chapter 130, 2020.

There is an obvious difference between the apocalypse as portrayed in other mecha works and in *Attack on Titan*. While the Titan's representation and mimicry of the mecha is amply clear, the fact remains that its form is fundamentally different. As discussed, the Titan, while being a representation of a technological body, is ultimately an organic body, made of flesh and bone, with anatomical structures not dissimilar to the humans that they are modeled after. Thus, to state the obvious, there is a narrative purpose to have Titans be in the form of humans while taking after so many typical mecha tropes. In the case of *Attack on Titan*, the Titan's human form is a way to visualize the culpability of humanity's role in the apocalypse. It externalizes the will of the party that brings about the apocalypse, materializing it into a corporeal body of flesh and bone. This pattern of thinking understands that technology has no will of its own; though technology may be the vehicle through which the apocalypse is brought about, the reality is that whether created for good or bad, developmental or destructive purposes, we humans bear the final responsibility for the consequences of what may follow. Though other works hone in on this idea, *Attack on Titan's* representation of technology and power through the Titans leaves no room for misinterpretation from a purely aesthetic standpoint. In the Rumbling, the apocalypse of *Attack on Titan*, the destruction of the world is not caused by giant robots or even nuclear weapons, it is caused by the organic, human-resembling Titans: giant, grotesque reflections of a darker side of humanity.

Recall the understanding of the mecha body as the Other. The Otherness of the Titan takes on another, more convoluted path than that of the mecha. Unlike most traditional mecha tales, the Titan is regarded as a monster, surrounded in mystery. Mecha are pieces of technology created, understood, and utilized by humans. Even in anime like *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, where the mystery of the EVAs remains an extremely important plot point, the humans operating it (including the pilot, workers, and officers) all have the opportunity to get physically close to it. The characters are demonstrated to have a strong understanding of how these pieces of technology are. For all intents and purposes, they are objects subjugated to the autonomy of human knowledge.

While the mecha are created, understood, and utilized by humans, this is not the case for the Titan. In the eyes of the audience and of the people of Paradis Island, at least before the existence of the outside world is revealed, the Titan is an entity that seemingly has no relation to humans. It is not created, and when utilized, it resists understanding. There is no loading dock created for the Titan, no weapons, no spare parts or plugs, no specialized team of mechanics handpicked to fix the Titan, all for the simple reason that the Titan remains a mystery. The mystery of the Titan is what pulls the reader along the story. It's something of a hydra; just as one mystery seems to be solved, two more take its place. Geographically, physiologically, psychologically, and categorically, it resists discovery, both from the standpoint of the characters as well as that of the reader. Still, as the events of Ilse's Notebook

and the Rumbling, among others, demonstrate, the Titan is ultimately also defined by its likeness to the human. As human and as technology, the Titan is placed into the position of the Other. The Titan as the macrocosmic representation of humanity forces the attention of the humans, including both the characters of the story as well as the (most likely human) reader, onto the darker, more unfamiliar sides of their own humanity. The audience is confronted with something so unrecognizable, but simultaneously something so distinctly themselves. The grotesqueness of the Titan, the power dynamics that they embody, the destruction caused by the Titans as representation of technology, are not something caused by an unrelated Other, but by the Other that is not so much the Other: the inflated representation of humanity that is the Titan.

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