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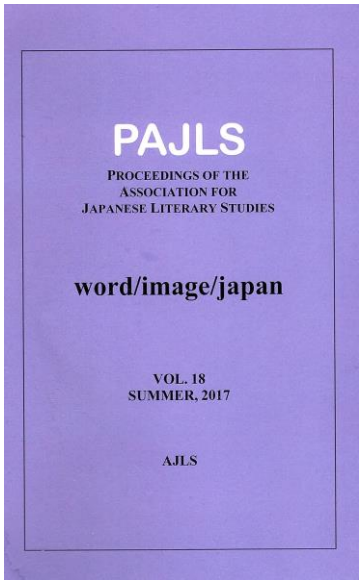

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STRUCTURING THE VOID: KANAI MIEKO'S "INFLATED MAN" AND PICTORIAL ALLUSION

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Kanai Mieko deploys in her writing what I have termed elsewhere a "constellatory" and interrogative narrative technique – as radical as it is deceptively simple – which, through its offering the reader a host of potential associations, allusions and connections, has the effect of making the generation of literary meanings the primary responsibility of the reader herself.[1] In the short story under discussion here, the 1974 "Kūki otoko no hanashi" ("The Story of the Inflated Man"), Kanai uses this associative narrative technique to interrogate the relationship between textual illustration, the reader, and the text. Textual illustrations, of course, are themselves always subject to questions about their associative function; as such, they occupy a peculiar, liminal space in any text in which they feature. Are we to regard such illustrations as part of the text which they accompany, or as being separate from it? Are we to accord them a legitimate role in generating literary meaning? What is their artistic or aesthetic value? These are the questions that that Kanai's story both ask and enact. The Inflated Man, a speciality circus performer whose "act" is simply (but excessively) to eat, is able to ingest an obscene amount every day because "[a]lthough food is something that converts to flesh and blood, in [his] case it becomes something that could be described as a kind of air, or a hollow that has no substance, but that continues to expand."[2] The Inflated Man's body however, is one of many images in Kanai's story in which a "void" is described in relation to its external "structure". Through its repeated association of "voids" with "structures", the story thus evokes the Japanese term "fiction" (*kyokō*, lit. "empty structure")

[1] See Chapters Two and Three of my PhD thesis: H. L. E. Tamura, *Gender Love and Text in the Early Writings of Kanai Mieko* (University of Leeds, 2015). Web. <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk>.

[2] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū* (Tokyo: Nihonbungeisha, 1992) 144-152, 151 (all translations are my own).

to signal its own status as a piece of fiction. Although the characters for fiction in Japanese gesture towards an understanding of "fiction" as the structuring of void (or that which is imaginary), Kanai's story also directs us to an understanding that such void equates to an infinite multiplicity of texts. Moreover, through referencing literary allusions that are also *pictorial* allusions (such as Disney's *Pinocchio*'s pastiche of Jonah's whale and Gustave Doré's engravings to Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty"), the narrative enjoins us to do the same, thus inviting us to read it *as though it were illustrated*. In this way, Kanai's writing not only challenges conventional notions of the relationship between the text, pictographs, illustrations and the reader, but seeks to transform the reader's experiential relationship with the text and its images from being that of a passive recipient to one of an active, engaged creator of meaning.

Even the bibliographic details of Kanai's story demonstrate just how elusive and plural it is as a literary text, existing as it does in multiple versions which themselves reach out to the context of their respective publications in order to suggest its multiplicity of possible meanings. The story first appeared in 1974 as part of a special, themed edition of the literary magazine *Shingeki*, entitled *Sākasu tokushū* (*Circus Special*).[3] This edition featured a variety of disparate texts, all taking as their respective starting points the idea of the Circus. As well as Kanai's story, the edition included discussions with ringmasters about the contemporary significance of the circus; a head-to-head discussion between the avant garde dramatists Terayama Shūji and Suzuki Chūshi on time and space; and essays by Terayama and film director Akune Isao.[4] The story also appears, in a different form, which has become the more widely disseminated and better known of the two, in Kanai's short

[3] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Shingeki* 21 (1974): 138-144.

[4]The articles referred to are Ozawa Shōichi, Shibuya Gasen, and Yamagami Shigeo, "Sākasuteki kokoro (Sākasu tokushū)," *Shingeki* 21 (1974): 100-117; Shingeki's serial feature: Terayama Shūji and Suzuki Chūshi, "Jikan to kūkan 4," *Shingeki* 21 (1974): 36-51; Terayama Shūji, "Sākasu no seijigaku: Issunbōshi kara savari made (Sākasu tokushū)," *Shingeki* 21 (1974): 82-89; and Akune Isao, "Sākasu no dentōgei (Sākasu tokushū)," *Shingeki* 21 (1974): 90-99.

story collection, *Akashia kishidan* (*The Knights of Akashia*).[5] The difference between the two is comparatively straightforward: in the *Shingeki* text, the story has an unnamed framing narrator who briefly introduces the story thus:

> I was introduced to a painter who only painted pictures of caves and I listened to his story. The following is what he told me.

In the *Shingeki* version we see Kanai's story being contextualised and, as it were, *invaded* by the plurality of texts that surround it. This is not merely to state the banal bibliographic fact that Kanai's story originally found itself in the company of other pieces of writing; rather, the "invasion" by these other texts is actually manifest in the textual fabric of the story itself. After the framing device, the main body of the narrative begins:

> Although I didn't completely believe the story of the circus, the kidnappers, and the vinegar that the kidnapped children were forced to drink to make their bodies' bones supple, I thought there was no way of doubting that, a long time ago, this kind of thing really happened. Stories like this used to hide, coolly and quietly in the ancestral ashes in the middle of a darkened room, and sometimes leak out in a faint, rasping voice. For me, the story was too equivocal to know to precisely how far in the past "a long time ago" was supposed to refer; I had completely no idea.[6]

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[5] The version of "Kūki otoko no hanashi" printed in *Akashia kishidan* [*The Knights of Akashia*] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1976) was subsequently reprinted in: *Shōwa bungaku zenshū 31* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1988); Yoshimura Akira, Kanai Mieko, and Hata Kōhei, ed. *Chikuma gendai bungaku taikei*, 93 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1978); *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū* (Tokyo: Nihonbungeisha, 1992) 144-152; and *Ai no seikatsu/ Mori no merujīnu* [*Love Life*/*Melusine of the Forest*] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1997) 207-216.

[6] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū* (Tokyo: Nihonbungeisha, 1992) 144.

The most pertinent question we might ask at the outset of this narrative account is precisely the question Roland Barthes famously asked of the excerpt from Balzac's "Sarrasine" at the beginning of "The Death of the Author": "Who is speaking thus?"[7] Barthes is talking about the interpretive difficulties thrown up by the apparently author-less statements that constitute the classic nineteenth-century realist third-person narrative. However, with "The Story of The Inflated Man," Barthes' question becomes pertinent because of the way the story foregrounds, at its very outset, the interpretive difficulties present with any fictional *first-person* narrative, in which any implied authorial voice is forever subsumed within, or obscured by, the narrator, so that the two are forever melded together, even as they forever strain to be discrete entities, locked in a constant state of tension. In this specific instance, any coherence of narratorial voice, which would allow the reader to regard the narrator not only as the *teller of*, but also as a *character within*, his own story, is compromised at its commencement by the fact that the text offers the possibility of two specific referents: the apparent "real" (but fictional) world referred to by the story's main narrator, and the actual context of the story's inclusion within the *Shingeki* special edition. This might seem, on the face of it, an odd assertion to make. The simplicity of the two, short introductory sentences of the *Shingeki* framing device seem to define three straightforward and readily-understandable categories: author, anonymous frame narrator, and the main, secondary narrator ("the painter").[8] However, not only might we legitimately infer that, in the narrator's referencing "the story of the circus", and his having "no way of doubting that, a long time ago, this kind of thing really happened," he (as a fictional character) is referring to stories that were told to him in the (fictional) past of his (fictional) childhood; we might also infer that the narrator, or rather, an implied *author* is directly referencing such stories as alluded to in the pages of the magazine

[7] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977) 147.

[8] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Shingeki,* 138.

itself.[9] This is because the narrator's "story" of the circus that no doubt "happened" is mimicked in the round-table discussion of the three ringmasters, published in the same edition:

> **Ozawa:** By the way, are we saying that "The World of the Circus" is successful, and that the circus itself has overcome its bad reputation? – for people of my generation and older, when we were children [we thought that] the circus was an extremely bad place; if we didn't listen to what was being said there would be the threat, "we'll sell you to the circus" – that kind of thing was in everyone's heads – and in films or in novels, if someone did something bad they would immediately run away to the circus; circus people were always doing bad things, and to be on stage was thought to be extremely sad – I think those kinds of tragic stories were extremely prevalent, but now, in contrast, I get the feeling things are much better.
>
> **Yamagami:** In Japan generally, the image of the circus is bad, buying and selling children and…
>
> **Shibuya:** I think it never happened, not in our circus….
>
> **Ozawa:** But let's say it did happen, it isn't just the circus, in all kinds of arenas that sort of thing must have happened in the past.[10]

The similarities between the excerpt from the story and the panel discussion are unmistakable; and set alongside one another, they cannot help but resonate with one another. This returns us to our Barthesian question "Who is speaking thus?"; and the answer is far from straightforward: is it an implied authorial "I" referring directly to the pages surrounding her in the magazine?; is it a fictional "I" coincidentally talking in a similar vein to the three ringmasters?; is it a fictional "I" deliberately shattering any illusion of fictive reality through the deployment of a deliberative

[9] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, 144.

[10] Ozawa Shōichi, Shibuya Gasen, and Yamagami Shigeo 101.

metatextual allusion to the *Shingeki* framework of the story? Even if it is none of these, of course, the mere fact of the juxtaposition of the Kanai story with the accounts of the three ringmasters serves to liberate the text from, to quote Barthes again, a "single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God)", reaffirming its status as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."[11]

Moreover, the question of who is speaking is complemented, and further problematised, by a different question: what is the referent? If we turn to the excerpt from "The Story of the Inflated Man" quoted above, for instance, it becomes apparent that the immediate referent (the thing that allegedly happened to children at the circus) becomes conflated with its own narrative inscription (*the story* about the thing that allegedly happened to children at the circus). Such a conflation thus serves not only to render the (fictional) "truth" alluded to more, as it were, inaccessible; it also has the concomitant effect of highlighting the *mode of* narration rather than the *thing being narrated*. This, then, is complicated further still by the fact that the narrative voice uses, to relate these prefatory remarks, *negative* verbal constructions, constructions that have the effect of complicating any simple, ostensible correspondence between word and (fictional) world necessary to the textual self-effacement that, in turn, is necessary to the realist illusion. Hence it is written: "[a]lthough I didn't completely believe…" (*zenmenteki ni shinyō shiteita wake de wa nakatta keredo*); and "I had no way of doubting that…" (*utagaiyō no nai koto*).[12] As narrative statements, they both serve to distance the reader from the alleged remembered past that the narrator is alluding to, through their fundamental *provisionality*. They both serve, as qualifying statements, to cast doubt on the reliability of our narrator, even before we have any kind of coherent notion as to who our narrator "is". In other words, through their negative formulation, the above statements are not so conducive to being susceptible to that willing suspension of disbelief necessary to the illusion of literary realism. Instead, what becomes inevitably

[11] Barthes, "Death of the Author" 146.

[12] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū*, 144.

foregrounded is *the indistinctness of the narrator's memory*. (This foregrounding continues throughout the story, as the narrator continually qualifies his narrative with conventional expressions of recollective ambivalence: "as far as my memory serves me" [*watashi no kioku shiteiru kagiri de wa*]; "there is such a thing as the distant view of the tent about which my memory is inaccurate" [*tento no enkei toiu koto de aru ga, sore ni tsuite watashi no kioku wa fuseikaku de*]; "as far as I can remember" [*oboeteitemo*].)[13] In this way, with the opening sentences of "The Story of the Inflated Man," the reader is left primarily contemplating *the mode of narration itself*, rather than any successfully-realised fictional world.

If we then turn to our excerpt from the round-table discussion, we see that precisely the sort of referential difficulties encountered in the excerpt from the story obtain here (magnified by the sheer multiplicity of the voices on offer): just as it is in the story, the circus becomes a thing about which stories are told: it has "a bad reputation"; stories abound in films, novels and "in everyone's heads"; it is a place that generates "tragic stories".[14] It further correlates to the Kanai text, moreover, in the way that these very stories are themselves only ever *provisional* in terms of their truth or falsity: "the image of the circus is bad"; "I think it never happened"; "let's say it did happen"; "that sort of thing must have happened in the past".[15] Taken together then, we can see that, for both Kanai's narrator and the ringmasters, the circus is not so much *a thing to be referred to*; rather, it operates as a site that reflects – or deflects – back to the reader *the possibility of generating meanings*. The circus is thus forever *present*, inasmuch as its configuration as a *thing represented* (it is never a thing; only ever a story *about*, an image *of*, that thing) means that it only exists when its never-ceasing multiplicity of meanings is generated by the reader. That such a generation necessarily bestows an atemporal existence on both narrative and thing-narrated is borne out by the last sentence of our excerpt: "For me, the story was too

[13] Ibid. 145.

[14] Ozawa Shōichi, Shibuya Gasen, and Yamagami Shigeo 101.

[15] Ibid. 101.

equivocal to know to precisely how far in the past 'a long time ago' was supposed to refer; I had completely no idea."[16] The circus only exists as "stories about the circus", and such stories only exist at the moment of their generation by the narrator and (therefore) the reader: "At the very least, I'm sure over half of it was a circus composed of stories that I had read, about fierce animals, acrobats, and trapeze artists. At the present moment, in the middle of a microcosmos that does not abide by the laws of time, this circus exists […]."[17] Not only, then, is a straightforward chronologically-determined narrative account impossible (because of the permanent possibility that any apparent memories of the circus the narrator might wish to relate are, in fact, constructions made from later narrative encounters with the cultural phenomenon *circus*); moreover, to *recall* the circus becomes, instead, to *re-read* the circus, hence its permanent existence "in the middle of a microcosmos that does not abide by the laws of time." The circus is perpetually in "the present moment".

One striking aspect of the narrative is its insistence on talking about the circus in terms of its *structure*; and, moreover, of the *indeterminability* of that structure:

> At the circus, all the spectators turn their faces up to watch the trapeze in mid-air, and it would be great if I could just remember the shape of the tent's ceiling, but, somehow – to continue my fruitless rambling – my only impression was that it was high – and at the time the tents I knew were the small triangular-shaped camping tents – so from the beginning I was under the impression that all tents were that shape; I don't think I even tried to consider what shape the circus tent was. [18]

The elusive quality of the structure of the tent, plus the narrator's perspective (repeatedly enunciated through the story) of viewing from within, so that the very notion of "structure"

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[16] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū* 144.

[17] Ibid. 146.

[18] Ibid. 145.

becomes co-terminous with that of the void it contains, surrounds and defines, together become another means by which the story continually challenges its own narrative procedures, and foregrounds its referential instability. Not only does "The Story of the Inflated Man" make a figurative association between "circus" and "story"; it also, through its repeated associations of "structure" with "void", makes a *pictographic* association. In other words, the story uses the symbolic representation of the term "fiction" (*kyokō*) to signal its own status *as* a piece of fiction. The two kanji characters for *kyokō* are "虚構", the first of which (*kyo*) denotes "emptiness", and the second of which (*kō*) denotes "structure"; as a compound noun, they gesture towards an understanding of "fiction" as the *structuring* of that which is *non-existent* (or, if one prefers, *imaginary*). Hence, in "The Story of the Inflated Man", the reader is repeatedly presented with variations of this image: an empty space, a void, a cosmos, a cave (or, to use a term applied several times within the story itself, *kūdō* ["a hollow" or "a cavern"]) which, paradoxically, stands for the framework that surrounds it. After all, to make a balloon *balloon*-shaped – or, to put it another way, to ensure that the balloon *takes on the identity of a balloon* – that balloon has to be filled with air. Thereafter, as the balloon's existence is dependent upon that which it contains – even though it contains *nothing* – the paradox entails that it is precisely that nothing that acts as guarantor of the identity of that which surrounds it.

This paradox is one that is enacted for the reader throughout the story. We have already seen this in the way that the story inscribes the circus: stories about the circus are indivisible from the idea of the circus, which is indivisible from the idea of the circus tent, which is indivisible from the tent itself, which is indivisible from the void that fills the tent. Similarly, if we turn to the beginning of the painter's narrative, we are presented with a complex overlaying of the twin notions of fiction and emptiness. We are told that "[s]tories like this used to hide, coolly and quietly in the ancestral ashes, in the middle of a darkened room, and sometimes leak out in a faint, rasping voice."[19] In this sentence,

[19] Ibid. 144.

fiction, as a concept, is referenced or alluded to thrice over: through its being the subject matter of the sentence; through the sentence's "literary" mode of inscribing that subject matter; and through the representation of empty structures. The literal subject of the sentence is "stories", stories whose truth, as we have already been informed, can never be ascertained: in other words, "fiction". Furthermore, by inscribing these stories figuratively, or in a "literary" manner (they are, metaphorically, able to "hide", biding their time until they "leak out" of the ashes in "a faint rasping voice"), the mode of narration suggests that what is being said about these "stories" is necessarily not *literally* true, hence fictional. Finally, the creation of the image of an empty structure (the darkened room) which contains another empty structure (the pot of ashes, with ashes here being synonymous with the simultaneous absence and presence that derives from representing "death") inside of which is a multiplicity of stories (or, in other words, *fiction*, and therefore, symbolically, yet *more* empty structures) effects the pictographic representation of fiction, while insisting on the endlessness of that-which-is-fictional.

We are also presented with the image (or images) of the Inflated Man himself, inscribed through a number of similes and analogies drawn from the literary and artistic realms which (aside from reinforcing the text's status as being a constituent part of a surrounding intertext) also collapse the apparent opposites listed above:

> I could only think that he was, beyond doubt, like a big ball, a big ball inside of which something mysterious was stuffed. What had been stuffed in him? I imagined a large cavern inside his body. Jonah's whale, or its pastiche, Pinocchio's whale, I thought. If the Inflated Man's innards were like a cavern, I would easily be able to fit inside, all curled up. Wasn't he made from that hull-like skeleton, a skeleton that had those dark cavern innards, a skeleton around which flesh and skin had been stuck. When I was twenty, I worked extremely hard to develop my technical skills and I drew a diagram of the inflated man's innards. Colouring it with watercolours and pencils, I drew a man

whose curved bones formed a ball shape, and inside of this,
I tried drawing myself curled up asleep.[20]

As the quotation above reveals, the text of "The Story of the Inflated Man" repeatedly makes its frame of references textual and artistic ones, so that the reader's understanding is directed, not to "the real world" but, primarily, to other texts and artefacts. Just as the "empty structure" that is the Inflated Man is inside the empty structure of the circus, which is itself occupying "a vacant plot"[21], so, too, in the story itself, the preponderence of the references offered to assist the reader to interpret the Inflated Man are textual or pictorial: Jonah, Pinocchio, Noah's Ark, the nameless proliferation of stories about the circus, and Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. This proliferation of texts is even more apparent in the story as it appears in the *Shingeki* edition, of course, being surrounded as it is with, not only a framing narrative, but also, as we have already discussed, a variety of other circus-themed texts and dialogues to which it cannot help but direct the reader's interpretive attention. We might also add that the whole set of referents to do with painting/writing/fiction/empty structures is rendered more immediately explicit in the *Shingeki* version. As we will recall, the frame narrative states: "I was introduced to a painter who only painted pictures of caves and I listened to his story. The following is what he told me."[22] By writing that the painter "only painted pictures of caves", the narration starkly draws attention not only to the image of an "empty structure", or "void" itself, but to the fact that the image is, potentially, an important, mysterious "trope" or "symbol" within the painter's story for the reader to solve, even though any solution is effectively withheld, thus simultaneously inviting interpretation while denying the possibility of interpretive closure.

The more common version of the story, without the frame narrative, might not invite so immediately and pointedly the interpretation of the image of the "caves" which habitually form

[20] Ibid. 149-150.

[21] Ibid. 145.

[22] Kanai, Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Shingeki* 144.

the painter's subject matter (and, indeed, this latter "fact" is never explicitly stated elsewhere in the story, so it is an aspect of the narrative lost to readers of the frameless version); nevertheless the image, and the concepts of "fiction", "emptiness" and "multiplicity", which, as discussed above, are tied to, or set alongside, this image, feature so repeatedly throughout the narrative that my central contention about the proliferation of texts and images directing the reader to a multiplicity of potential interpretations still holds. Moreover, this latter version offers its own ambiguities; by losing the framing narrator, the text renders the main narrator a more elusive textual presence, being nameless and genderless. The absence of these narrative determiners, as well as the lack of spatial and temporal indicators, helps yet again to reinforce and highlight, primarily, the textuality of the story.

As we have already seen, the story gestures towards multiple contexts in order to defer to the reader the process of generating its potential meanings, and the process whereby these gestures are made would seem to be an *associative* one. Words, ideas, images: all are set alongside one another, resonating and producing their possible meanings when the reader brings them to bear on each other, or forms associations between them. The text is asking for (or, at least, presenting the possibility for) the reader to form such associations, while recognising simultaneously that any meanings, or readings, thus generated are the responsibility, or at the discretion, of the reader. For example, as quoted above, the painter's pondering the "something mysterious" inside the Inflated Man makes him think of Jonah and the Whale, or *Pinocchio*. A host of potential associations are immediately offered up to the reader: present, past, actual, imagined, living entity, empty structure, exteriority, interiority, writing, painting, text, image, scripture as literal truth, its pastiche – hence falsity – in the Disney picture, the descent into bathos that might be discerned in the step from whale-in-scripture to whale-in-children's-story (Collodi's original children's novel) to whale-in-cartoon (Disney's iconic 1940 version, first screened in Japan in 1952), and so forth. As an example, let us pursue just one of these specific references further – the image of the whale in *Pinocchio* – in order to see just what sort of meanings and associations the reader might be able to

produce by setting it, as a single textual element, against and beside other elements of the text.

Let us, because we can, decide that the reference is primarily to Disney rather than Collodi. Next, let us create an extra-textual context for the Disney reference, in order to investigate just what sort of cultural resonances and associations it might possess. Accordingly, let's begin by setting the 1974 *Shingeki* edition alongside the publication, in 1973, of Christopher Finch's seminal *The Art of Walt Disney.* This latter was the first (and remains, to this day, the major) staking of the claim not only (as its title suggests) to Disney's artistry, but also – in his commitment to the moving image – to his status as an innovator:

> Disney's obsession with naturalism seems anachronistic if one places him alongside Picasso. [….] At the same time, however, Picasso's fidelity to largely traditional media – such as the stretched canvas with its built-in limitations – might be considered anachronistic when compared to Disney's pioneering of the art of imagination. Disney's great contribution was to break free of the static image.[23]

Finch makes his claim to Disney's artistry through his taking for granted the latter's right to be compared to, and contrasted with, Picasso. His book enacts a paradox, however, inasmuch as, even as Finch stresses how Disney broke "free of the static image", his argument is necessarily dependent, through the medium in which he makes his case, on such static images.[24] One might, in fact, argue that Disney's artistry is implied and guaranteed by its featuring in an art book, published by the art book specialists Abrams of New York. Each of the Disney illustrations in the book, therefore, stands as being emblematic of a conflict that can be summarised in the simple question: is this Art?; and it is one such image, from Disney's "masterpiece", that is invoked by "The

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[23] Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney: From Mickey Mouse to the Magic Kingsdoms and Beyond* (New York: Abrams, 1973) 144.

[24] Ibid.

Story of the Inflated Man": the interior of the whale.[25] Indeed, when the main narrator writes, of the Inflated Man, "[w]asn't he made from that hull-like skeleton, a skeleton that had those dark cavern innards, a skeleton around which flesh and skin had been stuck on?" one might contend that, for any reader who has actually seen either *Pinocchio* or the static image in Finch's book, it becomes difficult to conceive of the inside of the Inflated Man in any terms *other* than that of the Disney illustration.[26] And once the association has been made, we might then choose to set the Disney whale – emblematic, as it is, of the is-this-Art? question – alongside the Inflated Man, who is also repeatedly figured in the story as embodying the same question:

> A long time ago I actually saw his performance, but - how can I say this? It was a really peculiar art. Among his spectators were those who grumbled that they couldn't consider that it was a unique art, or even an art worth paying the fee to watch it. Just as there is the phrase "an unaccomplished glutton", in the past, a glutton was like all gluttons, and didn't belong to the category of art: in other words, it was said that it was the sort of thing that only proved stupidity, the stupidity of the greedy. […] Supporters said that watching him made them feel great. […] We spectators would think about desire and pleasure, but, on the other hand, we could not help feeling pity for the pettiness of our appetites. This was more or less the opinion of the fans; for those who weren't fans, Peach's huge size and huge appetite were talentless – he was artless – they looked down on him as a wasteful guzzler; with such a huge body he could have become a sumo player, he was a monstrous simpleton without even ambition.[27]

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[25] Ibid. 155 (see Fig. 1).

[26] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū* 149-150.

[27] Ibid. 147-148.

Billed as "an appetite artist", the Inflated Man's "art" is nonetheless continually brought into question by the narrator and others who watch his "performance"; and, ultimately, the artistry of the Inflated Man is not innate; rather, it is dependent on the aesthetic judgement of his observers. Those unappreciative of the Inflated Man's act reject the category "art" when accounting for it. Those, by contrast, who "watch [it] and feel great" experience something akin to the sublime, as they are led to a renewed appreciation of their own mortality and humanity (inscribed here as "the pettiness of their own appetites").[28] This question of adjudication might better be reformulated as one of interpretation, and it is one that we shall return to below.

For the moment, however, let us return to the image of Disney's whale, and restate that it was just one of our possible, associative readings or understandings of the painter's painting of the Inflated Man which led to the generation of these interpretive questions about "The Story of the Inflated Man". If we pursue the image of Disney's whale in a different direction, are there *other* interpretive questions to which it might lead us? Certainly, we might begin a new interpretive trail, as it were, by noting the (well-documented) influence of the nineteenth-century illustrator and engraver Gustave Doré on the animators of *Pinocchio*, an influence clearly apparent in the picture of the whale.[29] Having noted as much, we are then struck by a coincidence: every other single explicit literary allusion in "The Story of the Inflated Man" – the Book of Jonah, the story of Noah's Ark, Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* – is the subject of well-known engravings by Doré; his Rabelais edition appeared in 1854, his extensive illustrations for the Bible were first published in 1866. What are we to make of this coincidence? And what might we

[28] Ibid.

[29] The Disney Studio Library had multiple copies of Doré's illustrations of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Robin Allan notes not only a similar artistic sensibility between Disney and Doré, but also a similar desire for artistic respectability: 'Doré's technically brilliant, often vulgar and melodramatic work appealed to Disney and his artists, for whom comedy, violence and the macabre were easily juxtaposed, though both Doré and Disney longed to be recognised for serious work rather than merely for "cartoons".' Robin Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999) 23.

make of another coincidence: Kanai chose another Doré engraving, from his illustrations to Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty", as the cover for the first edition of *The Knights of Akashia*, which is, of course, the short story collection in which "The Story of the Inflated Man" appears. [30] (There is a discernible further coincidence: the strikingly similar composition of the "Sleeping Beauty" engraving with the Disney whale picture.) Confronted with these coincidences, we might argue that, when the text of the story references these other literary/scriptural texts, there might be an implied invitation for the reader to conceive these allusions also in terms of being images, rather than text. In other words, "The Story of the Inflated Man" invites us to read it *as though it were illustrated*. The main narrator's attempts to comprehend the Inflated Man, Peach, result in the former's envisaging the latter as though he were a cartoon; so, too, he tells us, "[m]ore than the circus itself (the 'real circus' which my parents had taken me to see), I was bedazzled by the *image* of the circus".[31] Moreover, through his referencing these literary allusions that are, perhaps inevitably, *pictorial* allusions, his narrative enjoins us to do the same. This not only has the effect of problematising – yet again – any representationalist narrative aesthetic; it also returns us to the question of aesthetic *value*, and the questions about textual illustration with which we began: are we to accord them a legitimate role in generating literary meaning or artistic value? Do they compromise any putative textual integrity that we might wish to attribute to a given text; or do they, rather, foreground the fact that such textual integrity is, in fact, illusory? In short, the textual illustration asks of itself precisely the same question that we have already seen posed by the Disney animation and the Inflated Man's act: is this Art?

In conclusion, neither of these interpretive trails we have just followed can be legislated for as being somehow correct, or "within" the text; no-one would plausibly claim that the "The Story of the Inflated Man" deliberately sets out to *intend*

[30] See Fig. 2 for his illustration to Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty".

[31] Kanai Mieko, "Kūki otoko no hanashi," *Kanai Mieko: Zentanpenshū* 146 (my italics).

presenting a complex constellatory matrix of meanings resolving around a dissection of the Japanese term for fiction, Disney's Pinocchio and the engravings of Gustave Doré (though one might, again, note the coincidences). Rather, our two interpretive excursions above are offered merely as instances of the *possibilities* afforded the reader when one accepts the story's implicit invitation to engage in the creative process that arises from the act of juxtaposing its various textual elements and seeing what happens. There are, to be sure, a host of other references whose resonances within and without the text, would no doubt yield, upon investigation by the reader, a host of radically different readings of the story. For instance, one might note, yet again, the "empty structure" motif that runs throughout the story, and set it alongside, not only our narrator who paints "only caves", but also the Inflated Man's insistence on his ultimately doomed quest to end up the shape of a perfect sphere because "[i]f god existed, wouldn't he be perfectly round in shape?".[32] Having registered this play of association between caves/the ideal versus the real, what would happen, what meanings might be generated, if we then invoked the most famous philosophical allegory of them all, Plato's Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic.* Alternatively, the Inflated Man's name "Peach" creates yet another allusion, this time to the Japanese folk story, "Momotarō" ("Peach Boy"). As one of the most popular folk stories in Japan, and hence a narrative which has been, and continues to be, recreated again and again through songs, books, images and films, and as a narrative which, through this process of repeated retelling has spawned, and continues to spawn, multiple versions of itself, and whose continued rewriting is given over to the readership, what might happen to our understanding of "The Story of the Inflated Man" in light of this association, or, indeed, when set against any of these profoundly different contexts mentioned above? After all, if Kanai's story figures Peach as though he were a cartoon, then we are immediately struck by the interpretive possibilities afforded by another context: the fact that Japan's first ever full-length

[32] Ibid. 150.

animated feature was the 1943 *Momotarō no umiwashi*.[33] One further question: when raising the possibility of the text's – or rather, the reader's – generating such meanings, might it not be better to do as I have just done (and am continuing to do), and frame such a possibility *interrogatively*? The story's two invocations of the whale, for instance, in the story are, as we have seen, offered as instances of "something mysterious"; they are effectively posed as a *question.* I, as reader, am *liberated* as to how I assemble and interpret the meanings, images and associations that I myself generate; and it is through the deployment of such meanings, images and associations that we see Kanai's come into play. The "empty structure" that is fiction is paralleled by the "empty" (that is, identity-free) reader that Barthes identified as being "without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted".[34] The fictional text is forever outward looking, dependent on the reader in order for its meanings to be generated, and as such, the reader, through the act of reading, ensures that the text is only ever present *in the present;* text and its reader engage, in other words, in a perpetual act of reciprocation, each requiring the other in order to exist. Thus, it is the living, actual conjoining of text and reader that brings the Kanai's empty structure into being. It cannot be separated from its reader; hence it cannot be separated from the physical act of reading.

[33] For a synoptic view of the cultural significance of this film, and its 1945 sequel Momotarō umi no shinpei, see Tze-Yue G. Hu, *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2010) 72-78.

[34] Barthes, "Death of the Author" 148.

Fig 1: In the belly of Monstro

Fig 2: Gustave Doré’s illustration to Sleeping Beauty