The Displaced Self in “Elfen Lied”
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Abstract: The self that is the sum of two or more identities, which are often incongruous, appears regularly across various genres in Japanese manga (comics) and anime (animation). Through such characters – from cross-dressing princesses to cyborg assassins – manga and anime challenge the boundaries of gender, humanness, sexuality and class; and in so doing, explore notions of the self and other. In a traditionally conformist, group-oriented society like Japan, manga and anime create space for displacement and discovery outside of rigid social pressures. To examine the fragmented self in detail, this paper will analyse “Elfen Lied”, a manga and anime series for young adult males. The female protagonist of this often gory narrative, about a race of violent mutant humans subjected to experimentation and abuse, is severely fragmented, and this paper will place particular focus on the way in which “Elfen Lied” displaces the self through this multifaceted character. This paper will show that “Elfen Lied” incorporates a range of affective elements, which appeal to the desires and fantasies of male readers, and simultaneously creates various positions from which readers may explore concerns about their sense of self and their place in society.

Keywords: Japanese Manga, Japanese Anime, Self, Gender

This paper aims to provide two interpretations of the fragmented central character of the manga and anime series, Elfen Lied (Erufen Riiito). The self that is the sum of two or more identities, which are often incongruous, appears often across various genres in Japanese manga (comics) and anime (animation). Through such characters – from cross-dressing princesses or vampire schoolgirls, to cyborg assassins or animal-human mutants – manga and anime challenge the boundaries of gender, humanness and sexuality; and in so doing, explore notions of the self and other. In a traditionally conformist, group-oriented society like Japan, manga and anime create space for displacement and discovery outside of rigid social pressures.

The interpretation of Elfen Lied offered in this paper will show the ways in which the series appeals to readers/viewers on two levels. Elfen Lied entertains fantasies of sex and violence, but simultaneously provides space for readers/viewers to explore anxieties about self and one’s place in society. Offering this dual interpretation is an attempt to seek an alternative understanding of works like Elfen Lied, one which does not focus simply on the eroticisation or abuse of the female protagonists, but also explores how we may use the text to understand some connection between the position and experiences of the characters and those of readers/viewers. This paper will then build on this dual interpretation to show that through emphasis on affective elements, the narrative ultimately undermines itself, weakening any moral message presented through exploration of themes such as Otherness, conformity, discrimination and abuse.

The manga series of Elfen Lied, by Okamoto Lynn (岡本倫), was released in novel format in 2002, with the twelfth and final volume published in 2005. The manga was originally published in the manga magazine Weekly Young Jump, which targets males aged from their late teens. The first six volumes were adapted into a 13-part television anime series in 2004. Due to the violent and sexual content, the televised anime series had an R-15 (15 years and over) rating in Japan; the DVDs have an MA rating (15 years and over) in Australia and a 15 rating (15 years and over) in the United Kingdom; and the television anime has a rating of TV-MA (17 years and over) in the United States (Eirin Kanri Iinkai, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia Classification Board, 2008; British Board of Film Classification, 2008; TV Parental Guidelines, 2008).

An isolated scientific facility discovers a mutant species of humans called Diclonius. Diclonius have horns on their heads and are equipped with vectors: long, transparent arms that protrude from their backs. These arms can vibrate at extremely high frequencies, slicing through body parts; they are also immensely strong and fast moving, allowing the Diclonius to lift and hurl large objects. However, the Diclonius are unable to use their powerful vectors when they are in pain. The arms can penetrate the human body without causing harm; they also spread the Diclonius DNA to humans, enabling reproduction of the species. When offspring are born from this

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1 This information and the analysis in this paper refer to the Japanese language versions of the series.
penetration, they are called a Silpelit, and are unable to reproduce Diclonius themselves. The Diclonius have telepathic powers, and are thus able to sense the presence of other Diclonius.

There are several Diclonius kept at the aforementioned facility, but they remain in confinement and have very limited contact with humans. Exceptions are made to this confinement for experiments, run by the various scientists who man the facility, as they test the power and abilities of the Diclonius. It becomes apparent that the main reason for such strict confinement is for the protection of the facility employees: Diclonius are extremely violent, and endeavour to kill humans, often in a ruthless and sadistic manner. The central Diclonius is Lucy, who is the only mutant capable of reproduction. She is thus extremely valuable to the director of the facility, Kakuzawa, who plans to use her to produce many Diclonius, which will eventually eradicate humans. Lucy, as a child in the human world, longing for companionship and acceptance, and is intrinsically caring and unselﬁsh, but is severely bullied and ostracised because of her unusual horns. She commits a series of gruesome murders, and is then captured by the facility and conﬁned in isolation\(^2\). The series begins as Lucy is escaping the facility as a teenager. As she leaves, she is shot in the head, a blow which produces her alternate self, Nyū. Nyū is infantile and socially inept.

Two university students, Kouta and Yuka, ﬁnd a naked, wandering Nyū on the beach near their home. Kouta is a kind-hearted boy whose father and younger sister were murdered eight years earlier, and due to post-traumatic stress, he has few memories of his past. Yuka is his cousin and childhood friend, who has loved Kouta devotedly since they were younger. Kouta and Yuka decide to look after Nyū, not knowing she is a Diclonius, or that she has the sadistic other self, Lucy. Yuka’s attempts to develop a relationship with Kouta, in competition with the sexually uninhibited Nyū, bring romantic and sexual comedy to the narrative.

During the series, through regular ﬂashbacks, we learn more about the tragic, lonely pasts of the Diclonius. Bullying, torture, isolation and lack of affection paint a sad, bleak and painful picture of the lives of these mutants. As the series progresses we are also taken through brutal, gory battles between Lucy and various mercenaries and other Diclonius, sent from the facility to recapture Lucy after her escape. One particular Diclonius sent after Lucy, Nana, has endured a life of conﬁnement and torture at the facility. She has a father, Kurama, (not her biological father) whom she adores, and she strives endlessly to please him and gain his approval. Despite her original task, Nana comes to live with Kouta, Yuka and Lucy. We also meet Mayu, a homeless 12-year-old who has run away from an abusive stepfather. She lives at the beach until Kouta and Yuka invite her, too, to live with them.

The series is set in Kamakura, Japan, portrayed as a verdant, idyllic, coastal town. Unlike another, at times strangely similar series featuring violent girls, Gunslinger Girl, the scenery is conspicuously Japanese. In the anime, cherry blossom petals frequently fall and flutter across the screen. Yuka and Kouta’s Japanese-style home, a disused ryokan, or Japanese inn, with its tatami floors, sliding paper doors, and large Japanese-style bath, reinforces the traditional Japanese feel to the setting. Streetscapes of Japanese-style houses, and images of Shinto shrines (such as torii, a wooden gate at the shrine entrance), regularly appear throughout the series.

As mentioned previously, the central character in this series is the mutant human with two selves, Lucy and Nyū. What purpose does this fragmented self serve in the narrative? Two core functions can be identified: ﬁrstly, Lucy/Nyū appeals to the reader/viewers’ desire and fantasy as an eroticised object, and the perpetrator of gory, sadistic violence; secondly, she is a vehicle for exploring and expressing the concerns of readers/viewers. The representation of this character changes throughout the series, in terms of physical appearance, speech and actions, and it is in examining these changes that we can attempt two interpretations of the narrative.

Lucy/Nyū is profoundly fragmented; the separation between her two selves is severe and thorough. Nyū is the infantile side of the character, who, when ﬁrst introduced into the narrative, is incapable of saying anything other than the word “nyuu” in a childlike manner, hence her name. She is, in fact, a baby, who does not understand language and is socially inept. This childlikeness is teamed with a tall, slender body, enormous breasts, and long, ﬂowing hair. Nyū has disproportionately large, round, sparkling eyes perched in a round face, a typically kawaii (cute)\(^3\) portrayal of a female manga character (Bryce & Davis, 2006; Shiokawa, 1999). Lucy, however, loses this cute femininity; importantly, the large, glistening kawaii eyes are replaced by slit-shaped eyes, and a wall of long, sharp strands of hair.

\(^2\) The conditions of Lucy’s conﬁnement are severe: she is kept wrapped within a full body sack, which is strapped and bolted to a thick, metal, cage-like frame that can be wheeled around. She is helmented (with only small holes for vision) and breathes through a small hole near her mouth.

\(^3\) Note that “cute” is a rather simplistic deﬁnition of kawaii; it is an ambiguous term that can mean sweet, pretty and/or adorable but also pitiful and/or helpless. See Kinsella (1995) for more on this topic.
covers her face, usually only allowing one eye to be partially exposed. Often, but not always, her face is blackened completely, melting into a blackened background, with an un-blackened eye focused cruelly on the reader/viewer. She is positively anim-alistic in her aggressive disguise. In these scenes her shoulders droop and the significant consequence is that her perky, large breasts, so overwhelming as Nyū, are almost invisible in some frames. Lucy’s voice in the anime is much deeper and conveys a calm and cunning aggression. She even uses the male form when she speaks in Japanese; in volume one of the manga, she says, as she ruthlessly breaks and removes the limbs of a victim, “tanoshii kai?” (Is this fun?) (p. 134). This question marker, kai, in Ja-panese, is used only by males, or by women impersonating masculine speech.

In what ways does this fragmented character appeal to readers/viewers? Elfen Lied is heavily inter-textual. This is clearly shown in the horns on the heads of the Diclonius. Although they are termed tsuno (horns) in the narrative, the protrusions on Lucy/Nyū’s head resemble cat ears. The addition of cat ears (or protrusions which look like cat ears) to manga and anime characters is not new: they grace the heads of characters in many series, such as All Purpose Cultural Cat Girl Nuku Nuku, Tokyo Mew Mew, and Vision of Escaflowne, to name but a few. Indeed, the use of this element confirms the construction of Lucy/Nyū as an object of audience appeal. Okamoto is utilising what Azuma has termed “affective elements” (moe yōso): recognised attributes of characters, which hold strong emotional and/or physical appeal for a reader/viewer (2007, p. 181). Azuma asserts that as the same elements are regularly used across many works and formats, thereby being infinitely reproduced, they form a database of readily accessible figures. Other examples of these elements include uniforms (such as schoolgirls and maids), glasses, and oversized feet (Azuma, 2001, 2007). In this sense, the Diclonius subscribe to an established formula; their appeal, drawn from these highly inter-textual, often fetishistic elements, is certain.

The eroticised representation of Nyū also forms part of the construction of appeal. Certainly, this kind of depiction is not unusual in manga and anime – Shiokawa (1999) traces this voluptuous, cute girl character to the boys’ manga of the late 1970s – and is thus capitalising on the established appeal of the cute and yet eroticised appearance of the female manga/anime character. The bodies of Nyū, and several other cute characters, are used gratuitously to make the series seem ultimately about appealing to sexual desire and/or fetishes. The female characters are regularly wholly naked, or exposing their breasts or underwear, or depicted in close-up, with the frame filled by their groin, their underwear, or their breasts bouncing. Nyū is often scantily clad, baring her enormous breasts or other parts of her anatomy, or touching other characters inappropriately, all apparently due to her childlike lack of understanding of her actions. On several occasions her immaturity leads to awkward, ridiculous sexual encounters with the naïve but well-meaning male protagonist Kouta – reminiscent of other series such as Love Hina and Chobits – where Kouta is left simultaneously embarrassed but desirous and excited. Erotic, sometimes embarrassing (for Kouta at least), scenes featuring two females are also included in the narrative. Additionally, the legs and arms of the Diclonius Nana, which were originally severed in a battle with Lucy but then later reattached, regularly fall off at absurd moments, and the clumsy, awkward torso and cute face of the limbless Nana becomes a device to create humour. We also meet, in volume five of the manga, a school friend of Yuka’s who wears a nappy. When Kouta glimpses her nappy as a gust of wind inevitably blows up her skirt, she rushes outside to remove the nappy. Kouta follows her, misunderstanding her actions, which only leads her to fumble and drop the wet nappy on her large breasts. These scenes are incorporated as ‘fanservice’ – providing the audience with what appeals to them, using elements which often do not have any other role in the narrative (Lamarre, 2006).

It is important to contextualise this eroticised depiction of the feminine subject. Nyū (and the other fetishised or eroticised characters) is placed in contrast with several other female characters. There is the innocent victim Mayu, and the devoted daughter, Nana. There is also Yuka, Kouta’s other love interest, who is capable, protective, reliable and caring, and skilled in household duties (she is also voluptuous and subject to gusts of wind or malfunctioning clothing). In terms of her personality, she is the archetypal mother, and we find in her another component of reader/viewer appeal. Yuka is in fact unique in the series, as aside from her, mother-like characters are strangely absent: there are other capable women, but no mothers aside from Kurama’s wife, who only appears briefly, when she dies in childbirth. This absence of mother figures intensifies the fear in the narrative about Diclonius infecting humans and eliminating the human race. As the actual vehicle for normal reproduction is an uncommon feature of the narrative, Lucy, in some respects, looms as the uncontrollable origin of the new species of inhabitants of earth. As such, Others are represented as the insidious threat; the message conveyed is that those different to us are harmful and untrustworthy. In contrast to this lack of mother figures, there are several dominant males (the selfish, cruel director Kakuzawa, the facility mercenaries, the male abusers of the female characters). This character structure pro-
motates a sense of hierarchical, controlling, patriarchal social order, within which many are subordinated and dominated by those above them.

The absent mother also places focus on fatherhood and fatherliness. There are a number of father figures who are central to the narrative, including Kurama (Nana’s father), the director Kakuzawa, and even Kouta. In volume two of the manga we learn that the director Kakuzawa aims to use Lucy to breed many Diclonius, and he will be the “father” and a “god”, ruling over the new species (pp. 181-182). Also, as an apparent consequence of his trauma over his younger sister’s murder, Kouta feels a need to ‘father’ those in some way weaker than him (the lost Nyū, the homeless Mayu, the tortured Nana). He builds an ‘ideal’ family, where he has affection and companionship, where the Diclonius and Mayu take the role of his children and Yuka takes the role of wife. This emphasis on the male as caregiver, and upon family, is noteworthy when in today’s Japan family and gender roles are changing: there are now greater expectations placed on men to contribute to child-rearing and household duties and more women are working after childbirth (Mathews, 2003; Nakano & Wagatsuma, 2001).

Significantly, *Elfen Lied* often incorporates more harmful imagery, with child sexual abuse, rape, torture and sadomasochism featuring prominently in the narrative. This imagery is not in itself unusual or taboo; as Perper and Cornog (2002) show, sex, nudity and sex-related violence are regular features in manga. In the sadistic and violent imagery of *Elfen Lied* we can find another component of the appeal to desire and fantasy constructed through the narrative. For example, the Diclonius at the facility are depicted chained or bolted to walls, naked, head drooping and body bleeding, as scientists (usually men) experiment upon them. In volume six of the manga, bullets are repeatedly fired directly into the face of one of the naked and shackled female Diclonius, in order to test her ability to stop such an attack. As mentioned earlier, we learn that after she was captured as a child, Lucy was confined and isolated at the facility, and that Nana was locked inside one room and tortured from birth. In volume eight of the manga, we learn of a female Diclonius who has had her body amputated from the chest down, and is kept alive by a machine, so that she can be used as a portable tracking device for one of the facility’s mercenaries. A device is inserted in her spine to continuously inflict excruciating pain, thereby preventing her from using her vectors. In volume nine of the manga a group of clones of Lucy are introduced into the narrative. These clones live underground, their faces covered by sacks, and have devices implanted into their brain which ensure they follow the commands of their male handler. To prove his control over these faceless, mindless women, their handler commands one to slice open her arm, then stab herself through the heart, and she does so. What might we gather from such depictions? Women are often made helpless to control themselves under usually older male authority. On one level, the depictions of sex-related and gender-related violence play to fantasy of a chauvinistic gender hierarchy. Further, the outbursts of killing and mutilation perpetrated by Lucy are also significant. The ability of the series to shock has currency with readers/viewers – Lucy, as a supremely violent character, becomes more than just a “busty battlin’ babe” (Orbaugh, 2003, p. 201).

However, in addition to the appeal to the desires and fantasies of the target audience, there are several elements of Lucy/Nyū that indicate a deeper function in her characterisation. Shigematsu (1999) presents an in-depth analysis of the fluid and contradictory process of reader alignment with the eroticised or victimised object. He argues that manga provides the reader a “singular/internal space of difference that is variously elaborated on and repeatedly transformed” (p. 133); he also states that the text, “functions as a mechanism that is capable of placing the reader’s gaze in multiple positions, and enables the reader to see from many different perspectives” (p. 137). Like Shigematsu, this analysis aims to show that the reader can produce multiple, subjective interpretations of a text, where their position (that is, the character or experience they align themselves with) is constantly changing.

We can re-interpret Lucy/Nyū’s portrayal, and that of the other females, as victims. Their confinement and isolation at the facility, and their suffering under authority, may be an experience with which the audience can align themselves. Readers/viewers may find in this representation an expression of the weight they feel from the pressures of a competitive education system, the demands of securing and succeeding in employment, and the fear of the responsibilities of adulthood such as marriage and parenthood (Arai, 2003; Kinsella, 1995; Yoneyama, 1999). The readers/viewers may also position themselves with Lucy, and some other characters like Mayu, as the victim of abuse or intimidation. A strong theme of the series is bullying; in volume four of the manga, Lucy is forced to watch a group of boys from the home at which she lives violently bash to death a puppy she has befriended, her only companion and source of affection. She is constantly teased and ostracised about her horns. As a child, in a flashback in volume ten of the manga, we see that the intense suffering she has experienced leads Lucy to vow to kill those who have harmed or rejected her: “Wasn’t it you who did not accept me? I was always so lonely… but… do not forget… one day, for certain… I will be back to kill every single other human…” (p.
The audience may be able to find a representation of their own feelings of loneliness and rejection in these characterisations. Also, it is important to note that not all victimisers in the series act out of malicious or sadistic motivations. Kurama, Nana’s father and a scientist at the facility, despite his great affection for Nana, takes part in many of the violent experiments on the Diclonius because he must do so as part of his employment. Thus despite his care for those below him, he is imprisoned by the demands of those above him. Readers/viewers may also find in this character a representation of their own experience of pressure for social conformity.

Lucy, as the perpetrator of violence, may be another position to which the reader/viewer shifts in their interpretation of the text. Lucy’s intense feelings of shame and loneliness produce her violent outbursts. She works to destroy conformist, hierarchical dominance, represented by the selfish Kakuzawa, to ensure that people like Kouta and Yuka are free from such pressures. Allison (2001), in response to Appadurai’s assertion that in our globalised world imagination overcomes postmodern fragmentation to create collective spaces that bring people together, argues that “imaginary violence” – that is, violence in fiction – can instead be attractive to readers/viewers because it can enable disconnection from personal suffering and offer a means for managing challenging experiences. This kind of disconnection is readily achieved as it echoes the sense of fragmentation that exists in the lives of readers/viewers (p. 253). In line with this argument, the violence in *Elfen Lied* may become an opportunity for readers/viewers to disconnect from their own suffering. In Lucy’s desperate, violent attacks on those in authority, the audience may find a means for vicariously diffusing their own feelings of suffering under social pressures.

We can also gain some insight into gender identity in Japan through Lucy/Nyū’s fragmented characterisation. In today’s Japan, men and masculinities exist in relation to sometimes conflicting conceptualisations of femininity, many of which are connected to the *shōjo* (lit. girl) discourse. Within this discourse, some assert that the *shōjo* embodies the shallow materialism, purposeless consumerism, vacuousness, irresponsibility and passivity of today’s Japan (Iida, 2000; Orbaugh, 2003; Treat, 1993). Young Japanese women shun the conventional life pattern of marriage and motherhood until later in life, find financial independence through employment, and take pleasure in spending their growing disposable incomes. The pursuit and enjoyment of independence and individualism by young women, and their self-indulgent consumerism, is judged by some as selfish, immature and irresponsible, and as a serious threat to the social and moral fabric of Japanese society (Kinsella, 1995). Others see the *shōjo* as fluid, unstable and rootless, or even as a positive symbol of freedom, as “liminal, outside both the productive and reproductive economies of the adult world, ungendered and innocent but with sexual potential” (Orbaugh, 2003, p. 205; Treat, 1993). Still more show that women’s lives are not simply about liberation from or rejection of social and moral expectations, and that the self-aware aims and concerns of Japanese women today are in fact aligned with values espoused in Japanese government policies (Nakano & Wagatsuma, 2001).

What must be highlighted is that men understand themselves within this context. The transience and ambiguity of female gender identity – and not just in theoretical terms, but also in terms of changes in public perception of women/womanhood, and to government and corporate policy regarding women’s rights, employment and so on – suggests that masculininity, too, as far as it reflects and complements femininity, is an unstable concept in Japan (Nakano & Wagatsuma, 2001; Sasagawa, 2001). Taga (2003) writes, “masculinity is being reconsidered and becoming less certain”, and, “traditional notions of masculinity are declining in legitimacy, and many Japanese men have experienced a crisis of gender identity” (p. 137, p. 142). As gender roles change, men may also struggle to position themselves, and Lucy/Nyū’s oscillating identity seems an apt reflection of such instability or exploration. The male reader/viewer may view the eroticised Nyū for gratification, or vicariously participate in Lucy’s aggression and violence, but they may also position themselves as Lucy/Nyū the victim or the dependent child, thus switching from a stereotypically heterosexual ‘masculine’ position to an alternative position or space. Iida (2005) remarks that “image-oriented” Japanese society today promotes the creation of alternative selves, and that this identity switching and exploration is a regular and desired practice of young people; it follows that re-positioning oneself through manga and anime is consistent with such a structure (p. 59).

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4 Interestingly, Dasgupta (2003) notes, when discussing changes to gender roles during Japan’s postwar rebuilding efforts, that, [The rapid diffusion of household durables such as vacuum cleaners, refrigerators and washing machines, resulted in women’s roles focusing on motherhood and child-rearing, sharpening the distinction between private/female and public/male… the emergence of the discourse of salaryman masculinity as the culturally privileged/pervasive hegemony was inextricably linked to the production and dissemination of the products – in particular, consumer products – the production of which underpinned the postwar “Economic Miracle” (p. 123).

Thus we can see the relationship between consumption and gender roles and identity persists outside of today’s society; the linkages made between the two in the *shōjo* phenomenon of today’s Japan are not new.
Further, both Treat (1993) and Kinsella (1995) note that boys and men are also participants in the Japanese culture of consumption (and the closely associated kawaii culture), and indeed we may assume that men too may want to experience the consumer power, the apparent lack of responsibility, and the perceived sexual (or other types of) freedom of females in Japan today. By aligning themselves with, or questioning themselves through, the character Lucy/Nyū — who is sexually extroverted, immature and yet powerful — male readers/viewers may be able to achieve this. Alignment with Lucy/Nyū becomes alignment with the shōjo, but this is not necessarily an example of feminising masculinity. Iida (2005) asserts that men actively use “feminine aesthetics and strategies” to distance themselves from, and challenge, accepted notions about masculinity (p. 57). Male reader/viewer alignment with Lucy/Nyū does not constitute the adoption of “feminine aesthetics and strategies”⁵, but when male readers/viewers step temporarily into the experience of this female manga character, they may be doing so to explore a space of transformation or freedom. As such, Elfen Lied may provide an opportunity to neutralise anxieties about their sense of self or identity (Iida, 2005; Miller, 2003).

Iida (2000) has labelled the shōjo a “pure and empty sign”, a commodity or object, which can be manipulated by girls themselves and by those who view them (p. 434). In Elfen Lied the character of Lucy/Nyū is moulded to suit the narrative, and as such she acts like a vessel to take on various roles. What makes this changing representation possible is the versatility of the female character. She is versatile because she can be altered to appeal to the target male viewer in a way that a male protagonist could not. The cute but voluptuous female body can be eroticised, fetishised and brutalised in ways that appeal to the heterosexual male audience; she can then also be masculinised, a characterisation that may embody the frustration or anxiety of the male audience. The same dual portrayal of a male character would not have the same affective impact. As illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, Lucy/Nyū is not necessarily “pure and empty”, but her femininity is the key to her function in this narrative.

The interpretation of Elfen Lied offered until this point is not an assertion that the series always effectively conveys or embodies the experiences of the target male audience. In fact, teeming topics which are of serious concern in society, such as bullying and sexual abuse, with silly sexual humour makes for awkward and usually confusing reading or viewing in this series. But it is not simply the humour which confuses the message of this work; the message is undermined when the eroticisation of the female characters interferes with the narrative’s portrayal of the characters’ pain, loneliness, fear and desire for acceptance. In volume three of the manga, the helpless, crying, naked Nyū is tied by her wrists to the roof, and held captive by Kouta’s university lecturer, Kakuzawa (who is also the son of the director of the facility). We know Kakuzawa plans to rape her, even though she is incapable of understanding this. We know that Kouta has reluctantly – it brings him to tears – left her with Kakuzawa, without knowing his terrible intentions. The reader may feel sorry for Nyū, or, by aligning themselves with her, they may feel frightened. However, these feelings seem overwhelmed and become undermined by focus on her voluptuous body: close-up frames of Nyū’s jiggling or sweating breasts, a close-up of her naked buttocks, and frames of her trussed up naked limbs. It also seems strange that we are shown the sexual abuse of 12-year-old Mayu by her stepfather, with close-ups of Mayu’s agonised, tear-stained face; but throughout the first three volumes of the manga, she is clothed only in a woollen pullover that barely covers her underwear, which we glimpse in close-up occasionally. The reader feels sympathy for her, and wants to protect her; or, they may align themselves with her, as their own feelings of pain and fear are stirred through the depiction of her victimisation. However, these reactions are undermined by the frequent depiction of this 12-year-old child in an eroticised manner. Although this paper has suggested that the reader/viewer may assume various positions in their interpretation of the text, ultimately, such depictions as these debase the emotions and experiences they attempt to describe, and detract from what seem to be the core messages of the work. It seems as if the narrative, through incorporating themes of abuse, loneliness, bullying and conformity, is purely evoking strong emotion, which it then melds with desire and fantasy. The result is a long series of affective elements, a continuous feast of emotional entertainment.

Interestingly, at the end of the manga series, Kouta must kill Lucy/Nyū in a melodramatic, explosive final volume. The decision to do so is made very reluctantly, as Kouta’s affection for Nyū overwhelms him; but, in an internal battle, where her desire to kill (from Lucy) fights her desire for love and belonging (from Nyū), Lucy/Nyū sets off an epic trail of destruction. In order to stop it, Kouta shoots her, but they make a promise to meet again, in a sentimental, dream-like sequence. The Diclonius threat is eradicated, as Lucy/Nyū has been killed, and a vaccine has been created. Kouta, we learn, stays with Yuka, and several years later they have a daughter. What is

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⁵ In Iida’s article “feminine aesthetics and strategies” (p. 57) are such things as styling hair, wearing trendy clothing and facial and body care, such as wearing makeup, hair removal and tanning (pp. 58–59).
teresting about this ending is that happiness is achieved by the threat of Otherness being removed. Kouta and Yuka become conventional parents, living a conventional life. By foregoing his eroticised, cute companion and choosing the maternal, mature Yuka, Kouta makes his transition from fumbling youth to responsible man and father. Such an ending shies away from responding to the very issues the narrative tries to expose, such as the suffering caused by conformity, social pressure and bullying, and the importance of accepting others when they are different to oneself. It also means that the narrative concludes within conventional gender boundaries; that is, alongside the eroticisation of the female characters, good men become husbands and fathers, and good women become wives and mothers.

This paper shows the way in which two interpretations of the imagery and themes of *Elfen Lied* can be made. The narrative indulges the sexual desires and fantasies of readers/viewers, building upon the established frameworks of manga and anime storytelling; the series is a construction of affective elements to produce continued entertainment. Simultaneously, it presents the reader/viewer with a location to explore concerns over their place in society, and their sense of self, and the anxiety caused by the pressures in Japanese society to fulfil the expectations of others. Ultimately, however, the moral messages of the narrative, on abuse, conformity, discrimination, loneliness, love and acceptance are undermined by the narrative’s focus on appealing to the reader/viewer through affective elements, such as the eroticised female characters and sadistic violence.

References


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