

Investigating how popular children's and young adults' anime, animated shows, comics, and manga shape their habits of visualising war and peace



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CONTENT AND SPOILER WARNING: This article discusses the series *Attack on Titan (Shingeki no Kyojin)* and includes mention of conflict, war and some graphic violence.

This essay will focus on *Attack on Titan*ⁱⁱ ⁱⁱⁱwritten by Hajime Isayama, a popular manga^{iv}, and how it portrays war to investigate the possible effects on its audience, typically children/young adults. This is one of the most popular mangas of all time, with roughly 16 million copies sold at peak readership in 2013.^v This essay will focus on how Isayama deconstructs and reinterprets the typical “hero story” as Hourihan calls it^{vi}. This is a story where the protagonist is a courageous man who confronts a monstrous enemy and the hero is just and celebrated for confronting such foes.^{vii} I will begin by considering how the characters of *Attack on Titan*, specifically members of the Survey Corps, conceive of violence and will use a theoretical framework from Springer.

In *Violence sits in places?* Springer conceptualises violence as culturally informed rather than ‘senseless’ or ‘irrational.’ This is predicated on the cultural nature of one’s sense of ‘place.’ Springer uses Massey’s ideas of “space as the simultaneity of stories-so-far, and place as collections of these stories”.^{viii} For example, if a ‘place’ has a culture associated with it of being dangerous, as actors within that culture we could consider said place a “killing field.” This occurs due to the mechanism of stories circulating about this place between us and other cultural actors. When this occurs, Springer dubs these ‘places’ “imaginative geographies,” a concept from Said. As Said notes, an imaginative geography “acquires emotional and even rational

sense” when they are “converted into meaning for us here.”^{ix} And, if there are imaginative geographies that are “killing fields” then this can lead to justification of violence done on those places. Springer uses this framework in terms of Orientalism, and how this works when othering a group, and how one can justify violence against the Other. Springer considers it impossible to do an irrational form of violence, as violence is informed by the logic of the culture that surrounds the place the violence occurs at. To consider a type of violence as ‘irrational’ is to delegitimise it and try and gain power from conflating ‘rationality’ with ‘legitimacy’, hence deeming the Other as having less legitimacy, and hence less power.^x

The characters of *Attack on Titan* live in a very unsafe world, this sense of insecurity is conveyed in the opening page by Isayama:



Fig 1.1 First page^{xi}

Isayama utilises aspect-to-aspect panel transitions from the top right most panel^{xii} to the bottom panel to change the spatial perspective of the three characters (Eren Yeager, Mikasa Ackerman and Armin Arlert). Aspect-to-aspect panel transitions are when one transitions between panels but focuses less on temporal changes and more on the physical space of the scene. Aspect-to-aspect panel transitions are akin to a “wandering eye” that focus on various aspects of the scene^{xiii}; here emphasising the relative size of the characters. This emphasis highlighting the insignificance of the children, and of humans generally in comparison to the Colossal Titan behind the wall. The first panel is almost exclusively made up of the children, Armin even being restricted by the margins of the panel. The second panel contextualises the children within the crowd that surrounds them, their smaller bodies further highlighting their relative insignificance spatially within the panel. With the final panel, this emphasis on the insignificance of the children is brought to an extreme. The almost comically large wall in the background connoting a sense of security and protection from outside threats. Nevertheless, the Colossal Titan still towers over the wall looking back at the children.

The spatial contextualisation that Isayama demonstrates here is used to correlate the respective characters (the children, the crowd, the Wall and the Colossal Titan) through their differing sizes with their power to enact or prevent violence. Here, the Colossal Titan dominates in terms of size, and thus power, over the humans, and this leads to terror in the characters and in the audience. The latter occurring through

our self-identification with the characters whose perspective we are interpreting this world; the final panel literally having our visual perspective aligned with the children. The visual-textual hybrid nature of comics also reinforces this through the narration. The diction of “dominated” highlighting the power dynamic between the humans and thus leading to “terror”; this occurring at such a fundamental level that as a collective “race” we are powerless against them, and we must fear the Titans. This dynamic is epitomised through Isayama’s choice of “birdcage”. In this metaphor the human race who, as a species generally, have the most agency in our world when compared to other species are equated to a bird is telling. Birds, especially those that we have caged and domesticated, are as a species one that is inherently less powerful compared to us, and thus have less agency. To the Titans we are nothing more than a bird, and therefore we have inherently less power and agency. This attack occurs in a residential city, in the homes of these characters. Following this page there are stories upon stories of tragedy and loss due to the Titan attack.

Fig 1.1 shows how these characters feel the insecurity of their world and consequently, there are several reactions to this powerlessness and crisis of agency. Many merely seek to survive through finding more secure positions within their society and through the places they occupy. For example, many join the military branches like the Military Police, which occupy the innermost and safest walls on Paradis Island where *Attack on Titan* is set in. Others join the Garrison, who secure the walls and are there only in the case of a Titan attack. However, the main cast of characters are either directly or otherwise associated with the Survey Corps. This branch interprets the appropriate reaction to an inherently unsafe home by combatting the threat before it can strike again. Thus, they use their cultural notion of

an unsafe home due to the Titans as a justification for violence against them. Much like the hero that Hourihan discusses in the “hero story”, the Survey Corps are “rational”^{xiv} and “good at fighting”^{xv} opposing an enemy that is “essentially ‘other’”^{xvi}.

There is an arc where the Survey Corps are pinned down by enemy bombardment, and the military leadership (Commander of the Survey Corps Erwin Smith and high-ranking soldier Captain Levi) decide the best course of action is a suicide charge. They present the battle situation as akin to that of a trolley problem. They could either do nothing proactive, and all the Survey Corps soldiers present, Commander Erwin and Captain Levi would surely die; or Erwin could lead a suicide charge with the soldiers whilst Levi attempts to kill the one bombarding them: the Beast Titan (at this point one of the biggest threats to the Survey Corps). When presented as such, it appears self-evident that the ‘best’ scenario is the suicide charge. However, whilst Isayama presents the Survey Corps as rational soldiers, he does not necessarily present their actions as morally just to the reader.



Fig 1.2 Scene from suicide charge arc^{xvii}

Fig 1.2 shows Erwin centred, seated, and visually juxtaposed from the ghosts of his fallen comrades behind him. It is at this point in the manga that Isayama reveals that Erwin has not been leading the Survey Corps out of a selfless drive to better humanity. Instead, he led the Corps to learn about the true nature of the world that was lost to his civilisation. Here, Isayama uses the visual framing of the panel to

convey the idea of the comrades viewing and judging Erwin. Erwin is in the foreground, the comrades in the background with the broken wall he is against acting as a demarcation between him and the group. The comrades' lighter toned colouring versus Erwin's especially darker toned cloak exacerbates this sense of difference. The speech bubble takes uses dialogue to further stress this notion of viewing. The verb "see" in conjunction with the stares of his comrades' ghosts brings the question of who is viewing in this panel and at what. As some of the ghosts are looking at Erwin, and some at the reader it poses questions: who are the ghosts focusing on? Is Erwin looking, and thereby judging, himself? How do the ghosts judge Erwin considering the revelation of his true motivations? Consider the next figure:



Fig 1.3 Erwin's speech before suicide charge^{xviii}

Here the ghosts are being used by Erwin as a rhetorical device in his speech to convince his soldiers of the suicide charge. This repetition of the visual motif of the ghosts could be used by Isayama to indicate an idea of Erwin appropriating their image. Even though they have already questioned his morality, they still stand behind them as Erwin's plan has merit, it is the best method to respond to the

situation. Ultimately, Levi says to Erwin “Give up on your dreams and die for us. / Lead the recruits straight to hell.”^{xix} So, Isayama is not morally coding Erwin or his actions as morally right, between the religious reference to hell, and the judgement of his fallen comrades of Erwin’s selfish actions. However, one could interpret Erwin’s decision to relinquish his “dream” as an admirable redemptive action before his death. They come extremely close to killing the Beast Titan, however the Survey Corps failed to accurately assess the Beast Titan’s allies’ capabilities. However, the Survey Corps’ method is never presented as flawed at achieving their aims, but rather that their execution was flawed. Therefore, Isayama codes the Survey Corps not necessarily as morally justified in their actions; however, they are efficient and rational enough to achieve their goals.

This justification of their actions as acceptable due to how close the Survey Corps come to killing their enemies that are dangerous is helped by the innate othering in the text of *Attack on Titan*. The main enemy of the Survey Corps for the first half of the manga is Titans, and they visually are coded as being the ‘other’.

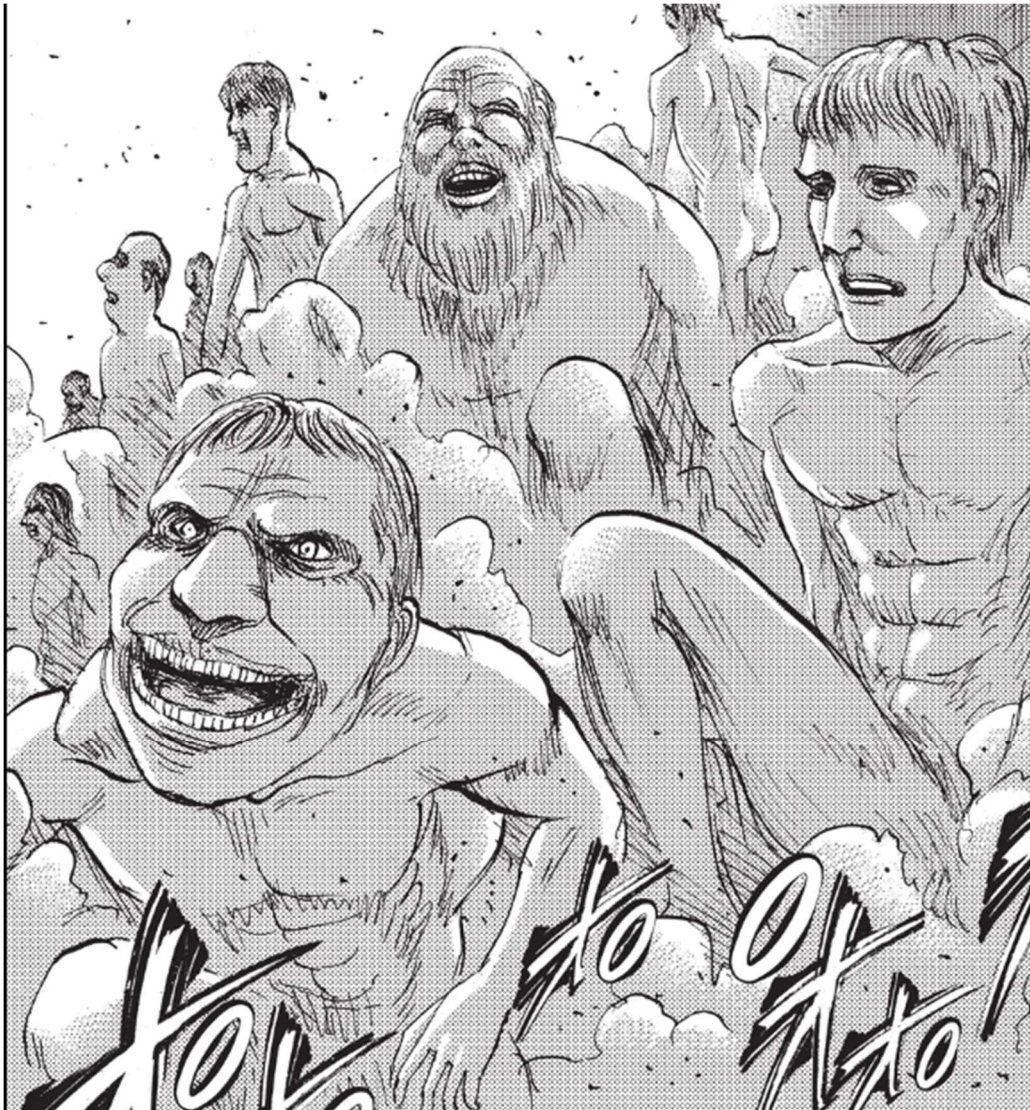


Fig 1.4 Typical examples of Titans^{xx}

Isayama uses a hyper realistic style for the unsettling Titan faces (compare the faces of Fig 1.4 with that of Fig 1.2). As McCloud notes, when drawing a human face in a comic one simplifies features. This act of simplification creates an internal logic that the reader follows and understands as the unwritten rules that determine a face.^{xxi} By breaking these rules Isayama is othering the Titans to the main characters, and the reader as they follow these characters' perspective. As McCloud notes: “**Other**

characters were drawn more **realistically** in order to **objectify** them, emphasising their “**Otherness**” from the reader.”^{xxii} Vernon notes a similar throughline where they noted that the Titans fall into the idea of the “uncanny valley”, i.e. they are akin to human faces but are distorted in enough ways that they go from being familiar to alien and foreign again.^{xxiii}

However, Isayama complicates this justification of the Survey Corps’ violence after chapter 85 when the true nature of the world is revealed. The threat leading to their insecurity no longer comes from mindless othered monsters, but rather from billions of people from other nations who are prejudiced against the Survey Corps and the people of their island (Paradis). As a response to this new world they find themselves in, the Survey Corps plan to use a deterrent from the Titan powers that Eren Yeager possesses to technologically catchup to the rest of the world and negotiate peace. This is consistently portrayed as the ideal scenario; however, it does require several of the main characters to procreate and continue a cycle of cannibalism to ensure that the Titan powers are passed down generations to keep the threat of the deterrent alive. Ultimately, Eren uses the deterrent to destroy the rest of the world’s population in a genocide. He does this for several reasons that are beyond the scope of this essay^{xxiv}, but suffice it to say that Eren’s motivations are similar but distinct to the Survey Corps’ conceptualisation of violence. Eren regularly others those billions that live outside of his home island, he regularly refers to them as “animals” a motif he has consistently used for his irredeemable enemies since his childhood. However, after learning the true nature of the rest of the world and interacting with it the Survey Corps realise that their previous approach to efficiently eliminating the threat is not feasible.

This culminates with the remainder of the Survey Corps, as well as their former enemies from the neighbouring nation of Marley band together in an alliance to oppose Eren and prevent the genocide of the human race. However, contrary to the typical motivations of a typical “hero story” though, they’re fight and its consequences are not so unproblematic. In defeating Eren, the Survey Corps is endangering their own safety as in stopping Eren, the rest of the world would surely retaliate against their race. To save the world is to welcome almost certain war on their home. As for the Marleyians that form part of the alliance, their home is already destroyed by the time they attempt to stop Eren. In both cases, insecurity and fear for their survival are explicitly not the main motivator for their violence. Isayama here deconstructs the trope of the heroes of the story saving the world. There is a moment when the new commander of the Survey Corps, Hange Zoë, rebuts against one of the more reluctant members of the alliance, and simply states that “**Genocide is wrong!! / There is nothing anyone can say to change my mind about that!**”^{xxv}. Hange then goes on to muse about what their fallen comrades would do.



Fig 1.5 Ghosts of comrades return^{xxvi}

Here Hange is appealing to the pathos of the reluctant soldier regarding the memory and legacy of their fallen comrades. Hange focuses on the selfishness of those that condone the actions of Eren. Interestingly, here the panel focuses on Erwin in the background, and this continues through the next aspect-to-aspect transition.

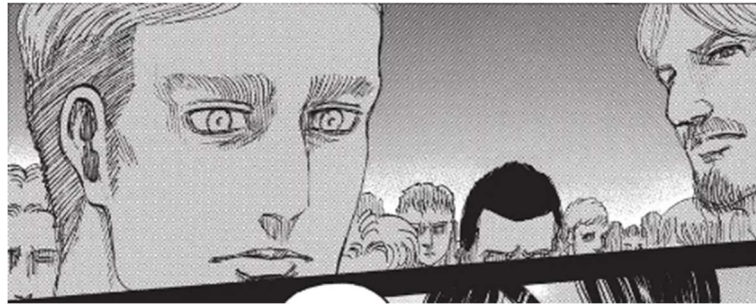


Fig 1.6 Focus on Erwin^{xxvii}

This is interesting considering the arc with Fig 1.2 and 1.3. Here it becomes clear that although Isayama raised questions surrounding the morality of the Survey Corps' actions previously, Erwin and his comrades actively pursuing the enemy was ultimately justified and right. This endorsement from Isayama is echoed after the alliance defeats Eren.



Fig 1.7 Ghosts motif after victory^{xxviii}

After Eren's defeat, the power of the Titans is removed from the world, and the surviving 20% of the world's population is saved, peace between Paradis and the rest of the world seems possible. Once again, the fallen comrades return and are cited as having fought for this world. Naturally, they died before knowing the specifics of what world they were fighting for, but symbolically this links the proactive approach to violence and survival embodied by the soldiers of the Survey Corps to the reality of peace being possible in the world.

Isayama has presented an interesting deconstruction of the typical narrative seen in the medium of comics. By creating a narrative arc for the soldiers of the Survey Corps from acting out of self-preservation to true selflessness and 'giving up on their dreams' (Eren's dream being the reason that he committed genocide in the first place). On the one hand, Isayama offers an interesting exploration of how heroes of a story who are soldiers and have been conditioned to violence from birth would justify their actions. However, ultimately Isayama reinforces that so long as the soldiers are 'selfless', 'rational', and 'proactive' they are on the right path to removing insecurity from their lives and achieving peace, even in a world full of moral ambiguities. Ultimately, for a young impressionable audience, this may be a worrying final note to end on for such a popular manga. Whilst Isayama does explore the complications of war and conflict, he does ultimately endorse it, just a specific version of it. To me, it is reminiscent of Geller's analysis of the popular Call of Duty video games, in which they note that the morality of the soldiers' actions in those

games “isn’t really even an ‘ends justify the means’ ideology ... it’s more just the ‘means are always fine if they’re done by the right person’.”^{xxix} An alternate version of this sentiment applies to the Survey Corps soldiers. One where the ‘right person’ is one that fights out of necessity for survival, where that **soldier** is ‘rational’ and can ascertain the ‘**best**’ method to efficiently achieve their goals and fight for what **they believe to be right**. But what those conditions truly are defined as, one can only guess, and for an impressionable audience with such a profoundly fan-acclaimed text: this ambiguity may result in justifications of very problematic ideologies regarding what is “right” in conflict.

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ⁱ This is excluding content and spoiler warning, title, references, endnotes, any acknowledgements, figure titles, and any copyright disclaimers

ⁱⁱ The original Japanese name is *Shingeki no Kyojin*, I will be using the English translation for ease of writing and reading. I will also be using English translations and consequently may misinterpret some aspects of the manga.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Attack on Titan* is a very dense and relatively understudied text. For those unfamiliar I have a blog post under the Visualising War Project which I give a summary of the world, characters and events of *Attack on Titan* which can be found [here](#), I would highly recommend reading that blog (entitled *A Brief History of Attack on Titan*) prior to this essay for those unfamiliar with *Attack on Titan* as a series.

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- ^{iv} The use of the term ‘manga’ is debated, however I will be interpreting it as a piece of literature in the medium of comics that originates from Japan.
- ^v Egan Loo, “Top-Selling Manga in Japan by Series: 2013.”
- ^{vi} Hourihan, p. 3
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 3
- ^{viii} Springer, p. 93. Massey, p. 9
- ^{ix} Said, p. 168
- ^x Springer, p. 93
- ^{xi} All quotations and extracts from *Attack on Titan* are taken from Isayama. 2009. Isayama, Chapter 1, p.1.
- ^{xii} A panel is the technical term in the medium of comics which are the individual boxes that contain the events of the comic.
- ^{xiii} McCloud, p. 72
- ^{xiv} Hourihan, p. 1
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 3
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 3
- ^{xvii} Isayama, Chapter 80, p. 24
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, Chapter 80, p. 41
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, Chapter 80, p. 27
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, Chapter 87, p. 17
- ^{xxi} McCloud
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p.44 Bold in original
- ^{xxiii} Vernon, p. 491
- ^{xxiv} I would highly recommend invaderzz’s video essay on this topic found [here](#)
- ^{xxv} Isayama, Chapter 127, p. 6
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, Chapter 127, p. 8
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, Chapter 127, p. 9
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, Chapter 139, p. 28
- ^{xxix} Geller, 19:16