

Matter as a Tool of Critique: The Grotesque Anthropomorphic Animal Representations of Samurai in Visual Art during Japan's Bakumatsu Period

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During the twelfth century, Toba Sōjō, a Japanese Buddhist priest, painted four scrolls of anthropomorphic animals performing human activities. It is widely speculated that Toba created them as a commentary on Buddhist rituals, or as a satirical representation of court and religious life. Others believe that the scrolls are a comment on the changes that occurred during the late Heian period (794–1185). During this time, the nobility's refined high culture was losing its grip on the government, and the warrior class was gaining power. Toba depicted animals to satirize an elite.¹ Similarly, the *otogi-zōshi* (illustrated short story) genre called *irui-mono* employed anthropomorphic animals to parody and arguably satirize various events during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). One of the numerous examples of *irui-mono* is the fifteenth-century illustrated handscroll *Jūnirui Kassen Emaki*, which depicted anthropomorphic animals enjoying a poetry contest, waging war, and achieving religious awakening. It has been argued that the *Jūnirui Kassen Emaki* was a parody that either satirized or praised the warrior class it depicted.² Throughout Japanese history, humor and satire in the form of anthropomorphic animals have been employed to express concerns about political, social, economic, and cultural changes.

In the decades before the beginning of the Meiji period, in 1868, and its associated program of modernization, Japan experienced another period of transition marked by significant

¹ Imamura, "Chōjū Giga," 21.

² Thompson, "The War of the Twelve Animals," 296.

social tensions resulting from the decline of the authoritative power of the shōgunate (i.e., the military dictatorship of the samurai). As in earlier periods, this upheaval prompted artists to express their opinions on the government and its conservative stance through depictions of anthropomorphic animals. This article explores the effect these critiques had through matter, specifically *nishiki-e* (multicolored woodblock prints), in which the Japanese political changes of the early- and mid-nineteenth century were criticized in an artful manner through parody and satire. This strategy offered effective ways of critiquing the shōgun's government, which enforced numerous censorship measures during the period. While the theme of parody and satire has been widely debated in English academic literature on Japanese early modern visual art by scholars such as Timothy Clark, Noriko Brandl, Sepp Linhart, and Alfred Haft, in this article I focus specifically on the anthropomorphic animal depictions in the *nishiki-e*, which have not been discussed in this scholarship. Although Minami Kazuo has written extensively on this subject in Japanese, I won't be merely translating his work but approach it from a new materialist perspective. In this article, I take a unique approach by using Alfred Gell's anthropologic art theory, which asserts the agency of matter, in combination with Katsuya Hirano's theory of grotesque realism, which he argues is a way to articulate social critiques by deconstructing dominant values and exposing the subjects' hypocrisy through grotesque imagery. I argue that the shōgunate's decline did not uniformly lead to increased grotesque animal depictions of samurai across Japan; regional variations of shōgunate authority levels were key influences. Moreover, animal portrayals evolved into a distinct genre, independent of censorship. Lastly, I use Gell's theory to argue that the material agency of woodblock prints and their critical contents directly contributed to the fall of the shōgunate. To do this, I chronologically contextualize the rise of satire in late Edo period (1603–1868) popular print culture and conduct a close reading of contemporary events depicted in several Bakumatsu period (1853–1868) woodblock prints and paintings through a visual analysis, selected for their depiction of anthropomorphic animals.

The images that I analyze are not the only prints and paintings from the period to depict anthropomorphic animals, but I focus on

them because they exemplify key points of my argument. These images are: Utagawa Kuniyoshi's prints "Fish with Faces" and "Pale Moon, Cats in Season" from the 1840s, which pioneered the use of anthropomorphic animal imagery in *nishiki-e* to circumvent the censorship laws; Nishiyama Hoen's painting *A Samurai Procession Depicted as Bugs*, which exemplifies the regional and material differences in the use of this animal imagery; Kawanabe Kyōsai's print *Fashionable Picture of the Great Frog Battle* from 1864, which showcases the evolution of this imagery; and *Battle of Insects on a Summer Night*, a print by an anonymous artist, which I use to show how the genre became a concept of its own.

Agency, Parody, and Satire in Japanese Art History

Multicolored woodblock prints, also called *nishiki-e*, were a form of popular art in Japan, specifically in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), from the beginning of the eighteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century. The subject matter of *nishiki-e* covered a wide range of possibilities. Many depicted subjects drawn from popular culture such as *kabuki* theatre, beautiful women, courtesans, and actors. In these cases, *nishiki-e* would fall into the genre of *ukiyo-e*, pictures of the floating world, depicting popular pastimes of the people of Edo. Other subjects not considered *ukiyo-e* included landscapes, battle scenes, and folk tales. Since the prints were cheap mass-produced items, large numbers of ordinary people—the commoners or non-samurai caste—could obtain them. Their rising popularity led to an increased demand for more colors and complex techniques, causing the art form to evolve over time. As the medium was mass-produced, Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art and agency, which foregrounds the impact that art (as a form of matter) has on its audience, is helpful for my argument.

Gell argues that art, as a form of matter, has its own agency and induces its spectator to perform particular actions. Similar to humans, artworks have physiognomies reflecting the character of the subjects they depict. Whenever we see a smiling person we attribute to them an attitude of friendliness. In art too, we attribute certain attitudes to the depicted subjects. Gell's argument is that the mental triggers provoked by the artwork are almost identical to the ones we attribute to social others. Thus, he argues that we can discern

intentions and meanings from matter such as artworks. This intention is what Gell calls ‘agency,’ which then sparks a reaction in the spectator. He distinguishes between primary agency, that of the artist with an intention, and secondary agency, that of the artwork that consequently inhabits the artists’ agency.³

Mitate, a visual rhetorical technique imbuing images with a double meaning, was often employed in *nishiki-e* prints.⁴ Scholars such as Timothy Clark and Noriko Brandl explain *mitate* in simpler terms as a method of linking contemporary subjects to past or mythical figures (or the other way around) through referential visual clues.⁵ Doing so, artists invoke certain implications about the depicted subject, often a humorous parody, or a satirical depiction. The difference between parody and satire is a minor one, but important for this discussion. While parody and satire both mimic and exaggerate certain aspects of a work, parody’s aim is to create humor or mock its subject.⁶ In contrast, satire has the goal of critiquing and revealing the shortcomings of society through humor, irony, and exaggeration.⁷ The visual riddles in *nishiki-e* were considered a humorous amusement by the people of Edo.

Katsuya Hirano builds on this understanding of *mitate* and investigates a unique form of satire that intertwines disparate elements to form a grotesque aesthetic. The notion of a grotesque aesthetic originates from architectural ornaments in Renaissance Europe that merged human figures and animal parts, representing a blurred line between humanity and nature. Such grotesque forms, which were hard to define because they existed between established categories, often left viewers feeling unsettled. This style frequently depicted bodies containing irregularities and inconsistencies, lacking clear shape or proportion.⁸ Independent of its European origins, these motifs became prevalent in *kabuki* plays and *nishiki-e* prints,

³ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 13–23.

⁴ Haft, *Aesthetics Strategies of the Floating World*, 91.

⁵ Clark, “Mitate-e,” 7–8; Brandl and Linhart, *Ukiyo-e Caricatures*, 9–10.

⁶ “Parody.”

⁷ Elliot, “Satire.”

⁸ Hirano, *Dialogic Imagination*, 159–61.

illustrating the irony of a decadent ruling class that sought to reclaim respectability through further degeneration.⁹

Hirano points out that grotesque realism is not merely artistic expression. It poses a fundamental challenge to societal constructs by questioning and rejecting core values such as righteousness, loyalty, and wisdom. Grotesque realism not only recognizes and exposes human contradictions and imperfections but also challenges the foundational values that uphold binary constructs, revealing a self-destructive tendency within its subject matter. In doing so, grotesque realism brings to light immoral societal aspects usually hidden or ignored by society, thereby critiquing the hierarchical order. This systematic negation of fundamental moral values is a key aspect of grotesque realism's symbolism, highlighting the disintegration of the ruling class and the total bankruptcy of the moral values that once supported their dominance. Thus, grotesque realism's power lies in its ability to deconstruct principal values, exposing the subjects' hypocrisy.¹⁰ Ultimately, Hirano implies that when the socioeconomic prosperity in a country decreases, the appearance of grotesque realism in art increases. In Japan, the Bakumatsu period represented such a period of disintegration of moral values and socioeconomic decline in which grotesque realism could develop.

Tenpō Reforms and Kuniyoshi's Animals

Once Tokugawa Ieyasu put an end to the Warring States period in 1603, Japan entered a new age of peace and prosperity with the Edo period (1603–1868). To conceal the period of political divisions in the sixteenth century, the newly formed shōgunate employed a Neo-Confucian ideology. The concept was based on social determinacy as human nature and suggested that society reflected the balance and order present throughout the universe. The shōgunate's Neo-Confucian ideology created the impression that society was a natural unity where its various components were arranged hierarchically. A key goal of Neo-Confucianism in Tokugawa Japan was to minimize the negative impact of private interests like emotions and desires,

⁹ *Id.*, 164–65.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 166–68.

which might lead to disagreements and conflicts. It is important to recognize, however, that Neo-Confucianism's proposed vision was not universally embraced by the Japanese population.¹¹

During this time, the *edokko* (a specific type of Edo resident) emerged as the antithesis of the Neo-Confucianist ideals of Edo. The *edokko* were usually commoners, and were known for their lavish lifestyle of cultured consumption and cockiness, looking down on people that worked hard and saved their earnings. The *edokko* often spent their money the day they earned it, using it for extravagances. They spent their time in Edo's Yoshiwara district (the pleasure quarters), attended *kabuki* plays, and were often the ones to buy prints of said subjects. Thus, the *edokko* were the primary audience of *nishiki-e*'s material agency. Most *nishiki-e* artists were also part of the *edokko*.

Around the turn of the eighteenth century, urban centers such as Ōsaka and Edo witnessed a departure from the moral principles of Neo-Confucianism. The Tokugawa regime enforced various regulations restricting attire, business practices, and the content of printed materials. Artists were particularly targeted by this form of censorship, often facing severe consequences for violating the Confucian code. In response, artists resorted to symbolism as a means to circumvent these regulations, employing covert methods of expression to convey their messages.

Between 1833 and 1836, as a result of bad weather, Japan suffered from the major Tenpō famine. This led to starvation and riots in the major cities. Officials called for reforms to keep the peace. On the level of daily entertainment, a lot of themes were abolished. This was the height of *nishiki-e* censorship, as the depiction of the most traditional subjects—*kabuki* actors, courtesans, and geisha—was now banned. Artists had to find new creative ways to evade the bans, none of which were as creative as the approach of Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Kuniyoshi was drawn to the twelfth-century *Chōju-giga* (scrolls of frolicking animals) mentioned in the introduction. These scrolls inspired Kuniyoshi to evade the ban

¹¹ Thompson and Harootunian, *Undercurrents in the Floating World*, 11-12.



Figure 1: *Fish with Faces* 「魚の心」 Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Late Tenpō period. Gallery Beniya, Tokyo. Original in color.

on depicting *kabuki* actors by drawing humanized animals with the discernable faces of specific actors.¹²

A good example that shows a hidden critique is *Fish with Faces* (fig. 1), where several famous *kabuki* actors were depicted as fish. This not only successfully evaded the censorship rules but also included a hidden critique against the Tenpō reforms delivered in a humorous way. The print shows several aquatic lifeforms with very distinct human faces. The fish are depicted on a backdrop of a stormy sea, with white foamy waves, and their faces are contorted in angry *kabuki*-esque emotions. Kuniyoshi's depiction of these expressions and the surging water suggests that the fish (*kabuki* actors) are cold and angry because the water is ruthless. The print conveys that the *edokko* were not happy with their surroundings, governed by the shōgun and his reforms.¹³

Pale Moon, Cats in Season (fig. 2) depicts the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters, showcasing how humorous animal parody could be used for a positive sentiment. Because it had been deemed immoral to depict courtesans, Kuniyoshi chose to humorously represent the courtesans and their *edokko* patrons as human-like cats. Kuniyoshi was known to be an ailurophile and made many cat prints during and after the Tenpō reforms. The fan print portrays a night scene in the Yoshiwara district with many cats, male and female, enjoying their night out. The Yoshiwara had a strict etiquette—the courtesans had to sit still while customers looked on from the outside. The cat courtesans, adorned in their beautiful kimonos, are seated behind lattices. They entice the male cats, while three others bear a smaller palanquin carrying a samurai. One of the cat courtesans approaches the front and is talking directly with a customer. All eyes are captivated by this spectacle, while other female cats point toward the scene and burst into laughter.¹⁴ Kuniyoshi utilizes the unruliness of animals, in this case cats, to portray the endearing nature of the *edokko* and their charming tendency towards slight unruliness.

¹² *Id.*, 82.

¹³ Hōri, "Ukiyoe Hanga to Jijiteki Jōhō," 47.

¹⁴ Nobuhisa, *Cats in Ukiyo-e*, 181.



Figure 2: *Pale Moon, Cats in Season* 「おぼろ月猫の盛」 Utagawa Kuniyoshi. 1846. Gallery Beniya, Tokyo. Original in color.

The harsh measures and punishments implemented by the authorities in the city resulted in increasing dissatisfaction among the townspeople, and the streets were filled with town criers and storytellers who condemned the reforms and proclaimed the downfall of the city. Not only did Kuniyoshi and similar artists capitalize on this discontent by using humorous parody in *nishiki-e* to circumvent the reforms and provide laughter. They also conveyed important political criticisms through the agency of the mass-produced medium of *nishiki-e* on its audience, where it was well-received.¹⁵

These examples show that Kuniyoshi had an interesting take on circumventing the Tenpō reforms, one that would set a precedent for animal parody in popular culture in the decades to come. Rather than grotesque parodies, these are amusing portrayals of *edokko* disguised as cats. But this is the first move towards a grotesque realism of anthropomorphic animals. Kuniyoshi created

¹⁵ Hōri, “Ukiyoe Hanga to Jijiteki Jōhō,” 46–48.

these prints not only to evade censorship but also to present edokko values and identity in a favorable light. Artists such as Kuniyoshi celebrated the floating world of edokko culture through cute and humorous animals.

Animals Ridiculing the Shōgun in the Kansai Region around the 1860's

As the ban on depictions of the shōgun and current events was ongoing in Edo, artists refrained from criticizing the government outright, including in the form of animal ridicule. In the Kansai area (Kyōto and Ōsaka), however, there was a very different attitude toward being critical of the shōgun. The emperor of Japan resided in Kyōto, where—unlike in the capital Edo—the reach of the Tokugawa government was limited. The people in the Kansai area were more inclined to support the emperor.¹⁶ There, artists were outspoken in expressing disdain for the shōgunate through their artworks. In this section, I analyze a painting of the shōgun's procession to Kyōto in 1863.

In contrast to *nishiki-e*, paintings required expensive materials such as silk and costly paints, were made with painstaking care, and were rarely reproduced. This one-of-a-kind quality meant that paintings were primarily intended for the samurai elite, to be displayed in their homes or tea houses, and were seldom seen by the broader public. Because of this, paintings had a less impactful agency compared to *nishiki-e*, since they weren't seen by many people. The material of the artwork is key to the discussion in this section, as it significantly influences the extent of its cultural impact. While paintings were not considered popular culture and thus any grotesque realism they contained had no impact on societal values, Nishiyama Hoen's anthropomorphic animal satire paintings demonstrate the lax censorship rules outside of Edo.

The marriage between Imperial Princess Kazunomiya and Shōgun Tokugawa Iemochi in 1862 was deeply entwined with foreign relations and internal politics. The shōgunate's abandonment of seclusion, marked by new treaties with foreign powers, created a rift between Kyōto and Edo. The imperial court

¹⁶ Lee, "The Kazunomiya Marriage," 299.

demanded the annulment of these treaties as a condition for approving the marriage, viewing it as a step towards restoring imperial political authority.¹⁷ The union was intended by the shōgunate to symbolize peace and cooperation, but the opposition residing within the imperial court highlighted deep divisions. Ironically, while the marriage aimed to unify Edo and Kyōto, it aggravated existing tensions, inadvertently paving the way for the eventual overthrow of the shōgunate and the restoration of imperial rule.¹⁸

After the marriage, Shōgun Iemochi made a journey to Kyōto to demonstrate respect to the court in 1863, marking the first time in over two hundred years that a shōgun had traveled from Edo to Kyōto. A new thematic trend emerged in woodblock prints, referred to as “prints of the shōgunal progress to Kyōto.” These prints incorporated elements from the popular “road prints,” which depicted people traveling along roads and passing through landscapes, especially along the Tōkaidō highway, as well as from “procession prints.”¹⁹ The processions were magnificent displays that garnered significant interest and were held in the utmost esteem. The prints depicting these imposing hierarchical events consistently mirrored their grandeur. As a result these artistic depictions became symbolic of shōgunate authority.²⁰

Nishiyama Hoen (1804-1867), an Ōsaka-based artist, arguably portrayed the 1863 shōgunal procession in the painting seen in fig. 3. The painting shows a samurai procession, but the humans have been turned into insects and their tools have been turned into organic objects such as grasses and flowers. It is unknown when exactly Hoen painted it, but Imahashi Riko interprets it as an allusion to the wedding of Princess Kazunomiya and the Shōgun Iemochi in 1862, which would indicate it was painted in the early 1860s.²¹

¹⁷ *Id.*, 295-97.

¹⁸ *Id.*, 303-4.

¹⁹ Sugimoto and Burtscher, “Shifting Perspectives,” 9.

²⁰ Vaporis, “Lordly Pageantry,” 9-10.

²¹ Imahashi, *Edo No Dōbutsuga*, 147-65.



Figure 3: *A Samurai Procession Depicted as Bugs* 「虫行列図」 Nishiyama Hoen. Ca. 1863. The British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Original in color.

The procession moves from the bottom right corner up to the top left. There is no background imagery, placing the focus solely on the anthropomorphic insects, while the tall plants bring the small size of the insects into perspective. The samurai have been transformed into insects containing multiple legs, their pulsating thoraxes and enlarged abdomens vividly imagined. The most important piece of the procession, the large palanquin in which the shōgun presumably sits, is depicted as an insect cage carried by six large crickets. In Japan at the time, cicadas and crickets were kept in these enclosures and prized for their singing. It is possible that Hoen intended to portray the shōgun as a loud and bothersome nuisance who seldom ventured out of his shōgunal palace and chirped commands to little or no effect.

The various plants depicted in the painting are noteworthy. Next to the shōgun, a large Japanese grasshopper carrying a soybean is surrounded by beautyberries symbolizing luggage, rice plants, and nut grass with field chrysanthemums fashioned as spears. Another palanquin is depicted as a wasp's nest, while floral spears comprised of burners, pink thoroughwort, maiden flower, and limonium stand guard, accompanied by two wingless crickets and two wasps carrying the personal luggage of their lord, artistically rendered as blooming morning glory and rose hip. The flowers depicted in Hoen's

painting are all autumnal plants, indicating that the procession takes place in autumn. Autumn is also a time for harvesting crops, which might also be indicated by the rice plants carried by the insect samurai. Crickets and grasshoppers are notorious for eating and damaging crops ready for harvest, often decimating entire fields and instigating famines. Furthermore, people in Japan often paid taxes and rent to the upper caste of samurai in rice. It is easy to deduct a meaning from this imagery, as Hoen likely intended to tell a story of samurai taking the people's food or money for their own enrichment.

It is also easy to think of the insects in Hoen's painting as pests, since all of the depicted insects have a reputation for being a nuisance. This suggests that Hoen is portraying the samurai as pests to the country. Given that processions were typically depicted as impressive hierarchical events, the diminution of the subjects into small insects represents an inversion of hierarchy. The inclusion of the shōgun, in particular, emphasizes this idea. By literally looking down upon the unimpressive procession of tiny insects, the viewer receives a satirical take on the grandiosity usually associated with such events. Hoen's humorous painting uses the shōgunal procession as a subject to highlight the absurdity of a samurai parade. By satirizing the established visual language of samurai processions, the painting exposes the decline of the shōgunate's authority by portraying the samurai as tiny grotesque insects holding grasses and flowers.

The shōgunal marriage and the procession to Kyōto were seen by many as evidence of the growing political weakness of the shōgunate. While Edo-based artists had to be discreet to avoid prosecution for slander, artists in the Kansai area were inspired by these events to make overtly political works. As the shōgun and his ban on the depiction of current events and high officials did not hold much sway in Kyōto and Ōsaka, artists were less restricted from painting their political attitudes. Hoen openly satirized the samurai and even went as far as depicting the shōgun through animal imagery. And although the painting wouldn't have had a large audience, the deformity of the subjects brings about a grotesque realism that devalues the normative authority of the samurai.

Animal Imagery in Late Bakumatsu Battle Prints

In 1864 the Satsuma and Chōshū domains rebelled, leading to skirmishes between loyalists and shōgun forces in the countryside. In the next section, I contextualize the reaction of the general populace to this crisis and show how from 1864 Edo print artists such as Kawanabe Kyōsai also started depicting the battles in a grotesque manner using animal imagery.

The shōgun launched an expedition against Satsuma and Chōshū in 1864 to gain control over these outer loyalist domains, leading to increased traffic and strain on villages along main roads. These villages faced the burden of increased taxation for post station expenses. During these tumultuous final years of the shōgunate, riots erupted in Edo and rural areas, high commodity prices drove people to theft, and *rōnin* (masterless samurai) attacked villages. With the shōgunate preoccupied with larger rebellions in the south, many villages established self-defense forces. Some villages, exploiting the weakening Tokugawa authority, pursued social justice, economic equality, and political freedom. Their defense forces served dual purposes: as protection against bandits and *rōnin*, and as a tool for asserting independence from central governance.²²

Almost two decades after Kuniyoshi first introduced anthropomorphic animal imagery to circumvent censorship laws, Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889) used such imagery to portray shōgunal forces fighting a rebellion in a triptych print (fig. 4) produced in 1864. Although the shōgunate strictly forbade the depiction of political events, numerous prints were still published without legal permission. Kyōsai and his publisher had to sign the print with pseudonyms to avoid legal problems.²³

Starting on the right side of the triptych, we see a large army of blue frogs along a shoreline in the top right corner. The frogs wear leaves as armor and hold bulrush as spears. In front of them sits a larger brown frog, presumably the army's commander, riding another frog as a human would ride a horse. In the middle of the right print, a morbid scene takes place as several enemy frogs are beheaded, with blood gushing out of their bodies. Kyōsai made sure

²² Steele, *Alternative Narratives*, 36–38, 49.

²³ Sadamura, *Kyōsai*, 92.



Figure 4: *Fashionable Picture of the Great Frog Battle* 「風流蛙大合戦之図」 Kawanabe Kyōsai. 1864. Photograph © 2024 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Original in color.

to include morbid scenes to show the destructiveness of these battles and included clear symbolism to show that these frogs represented specific real-world figures. In the lower right corner of the image, canons made out of organic sacs and lotus wheels shoot water jets at the frogs' enemies while others gather munition in the form of lotus seeds. On the wheels are a crest indicating who Kyōsai is depicting here. This emblem, containing six hollyhocks, was a symbol often used in satirical prints to represent the Aizu, a close ally of the Tokugawa.²⁴ The centerpiece of the triptych is thematically cut in half: at the top is a sea battle with the opposing armies of frogs on leaf boats shooting reed arrows at each other while others jump from boat to boat. In the lower half of the print, we see a continuation of the battle depicted on the right print of the triptych, with various gruesome executions as enemy frogs trip over each other in outright chaos. The grotesque realism of the anthropomorphic frogs lays bare the Tokugawa's destructive and unrighteous authority.

Finally, the left print of the triptych shows the opposing faction of frogs, which are slightly browner in color. In the lower-left corner, the frogs from the battle on the beach are being pressured into the river, jumping in the blue water in search of rescue on one of the leaf boats while spears prick them from behind. In the middle of the left print, a large impact from the water cannons on the right print smashes multiple frogs through the air. Finally, on a hill in the top

²⁴ *Ibid.*

left of the print, we see the opposing army behind leaf walls bearing a crest of three-leafed arrowhead plants, which represented the Mōri clan who ruled the Chōshū domain.²⁵

It is unclear if Kyōsai chose to pick a side in this print as strong arguments could be made for both factions. On the one hand, the Tokugawa are depicted as ruthless killers but victors. The Mōri, on the other hand, face defeat but still stand proudly for their ideals. The people in the villages would have been interested in these prints as the events depicted affected them directly. Whether these villagers were interested in the prints for their comic relief or for their opinions about the opposing sides, it would have been clear that the prints satirized the political sphere. Moreover, the agency these prints had on the villages could have directly influenced their stances on the conflict with the ultimate outcome of inspiring villagers to establish the self-defense forces.

During the mid-1860s, as the Tokugawa shōgunate suppressed rebelling samurai clans, rural life became increasingly challenging. Farmers, either aligning with the Satsuma and Chōshū domains or striving for survival, faced a hostile political landscape. In contrast, the *edokko* enjoyed a relatively comfortable life under Tokugawa rule. They were reluctant to see “country-bumpkins,” perceived as undermining moral values and distinguished by thick accents, take control of their city. However, the shōgunate’s failure to repel foreign intruders led to widespread disenchantment in Edo by 1868, exacerbated by harsh living conditions due to natural disasters, epidemics, riots, and wars.²⁶ The onset of the Boshin War in January 1868, a civil conflict between the emperor’s loyalists and the shōgunate, marked a turning point. As the imperial army approached Edo, lax censorship amidst the chaos spurred a surge in satirical publications and free political criticism. During this period, until stricter censorship was reinstated by the new government around May 1868, approximately 300 satirical political prints were produced.²⁷ These prints, technically still illicit, were often published anonymously to avoid retribution. Brandl suggests

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Steele, *Alternative Narratives*, 61–63.

²⁷ *Id.*, 68, 71, 73.

that Kuniyoshi played a pivotal role in this explosion of caricature during the Boshin War.²⁸

The final print I analyze—published during this three-month period of free political expression—showcases that even in a time with no censorship, anthropomorphic animal satire was still utilized (fig. 5). Based on the intricate style it is clear that this print was made by a renowned artist, but it is unclear who, as there are no seals from the artist and publisher. The print is a diptych diagonally cut into two opposing anthropomorphic insect factions waging a battle in tall grass, which brings a perspective that highlights the small scale of the print's subjects. The symbolism of the insects and their kimonos sporting the *kamon* (familial crests) of the different clans is very intricate, but not my primary focus here. The important factor is that the *kamon* on the right faction indicates loyalist forces and the *kamon* on the left faction indicates Tokugawa forces. I would note two specific individuals. Directly under the title of the print, on the right side of the diptych, is a firefly with a human body riding a praying mantis. The firefly's kimono is decorated with



Figure 5: *Battle of Insects on a Summer Night* 「夏の夜虫合戦」. Unknown artist. 1868. Waseda University Library, Tokyo. Original in color.

²⁸ Brandl and Linhart, *Ukiyo-e Caricatures*, 63–64, 131.

a chrysanthemum, indicating that this should be understood as the new emperor Meiji. This is further confirmed by the text above the firefly, which reads “Don’t be afraid of the light” implying the country’s bright new modern path under emperor Meiji’s rule.²⁹ The other insect I would like to highlight is the cricket in the top left of the print. It too wears a light blue kimono with a chrysanthemum. This is supposed to be Princess Kazunomiya, who still resided in Edo castle at the time of the war and helped negotiate a peaceful transfer of power to the Meiji emperor.³⁰

The anonymous artist of the print depicted both sides of the conflict as grotesque insects, not indicating his own preference but instead exhibiting an overall disdain for the chaos that the revolution brought to Edo. Many of the illegal prints produced during this short timeframe had similar rhetoric, which, if we follow Gell’s theory, was imbued with an agency influencing the perspectives of people in Edo on current events. This may have sparked either side to action, as their future livelihoods depended on it. Furthermore, this print shows particular evidence that even in a time with few repercussions for direct political satire, artists still chose to use anthropomorphic animal imagery to depict political actors. This imagery had evolved from its first iterations by Kuniyoshi as a way of evading censorship. This means that consciously or unconsciously, artists must have felt the power of grotesque realism as a weapon to satirize the samurai.

Conclusion

Artists of the Bakumatsu period captured its tumultuous times, often using symbolism and allegory to veil their critical agency and evade censorship, especially under the Tenpō reforms. Kuniyoshi pioneered the use of anthropomorphic animals in *nishiki-e* to depict taboo subjects such as *kabuki* actors and courtesans. He depicted the *edokko* as gentle animals such as cats in a humorous way. This contrasted with artists in Kyōto and Ōsaka, who were less restricted by censorship. They boldly critiqued the shōgunate, depicting samurai and even the shōgun as grotesque animals such as insects. Kyōsai’s prints, such as the frog battle scene, continued this trend

²⁹ 「しかりのひかりでおそれるな」 . [My translation]

³⁰ Nakura, *Etoki Bakumatsu Fūshiga to Tennō*, 152–57.

back in Edo in the mid-1860s, when the Satsuma and Chōshū rebellion spread through the countryside. In the years immediately after Kyosai's print appeared, grotesque realism was employed numerous times in woodblock printing. The 1868 anonymous insect print is one example of many.

Kuniyoshi's humorous animal depictions offered a subtle critique of the Tenpō reforms. The use of animal imagery for ridicule resurfaced in 1864 with Kyōsai's frog battle print. However, in the Kansai region, artists used animal imagery to mock the shōgun as early as the 1850s. I have argued that this contradicts Hirano's suggestion of a linear increase in ridicule, indicating that the inclusion of grotesque realism in visual art varied based on local circumstances, such as the shōgunate's authority and the subjects of satire. Furthermore, the portrayal of samurai as grotesque animals inverted the depiction of commoners. Kuniyoshi's portrayal of *edokko* as gentle animals suggested their honesty and innocence, while the depiction of samurai as insects and frogs implied their nuisance. Grotesque realism became a powerful tool of political satire, even during periods of unrestricted criticism. The insect print of 1868 exemplifies this, targeting both sides of the conflict with clear symbolism yet maintaining grotesque depictions. I have argued that this approach underscores the artist's awareness of the artwork's material agency, confirming that during the Bakumatsu period, satire, through grotesque realism, in the mass-produced *nishiki-e* influenced the audience to act, either against the status-quo, or in defense of it. Through this, grotesque realism cemented its role in shaping political opinions.

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Kawanabe Kyōsai. *Fashionable Picture of the Great Frog Battle* 「風流蛙大合戦之図」. 1864. Woodblock print. Photograph © 2024 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Artist: Kawanabe Kyōsai, Japanese, 1831–1889; Publisher: Surugaya Sakujirō, Japanese; Blockcutter: Katada Chōjirō (Hori Chō); Japanese Fashionable Battle of Frogs (Fōryō kaeru ōgassen no zu); Japanese, Edo period, 1864 (Bunkyō 4/Genji 1), 2nd month Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper Vertical ōban triptych; 35.4 × 73.8 cm (13 15/16 × 29 1/16 in.); Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; William Sturgis Bigelow Collection; 11.37139a-c.

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