

Megan Rose O'Kane

40082809

# Geographies of Suicide and the Representation of Self-Sacrifice in Japanese Popular Culture and Media



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is my own, except where explicitly identified.

## Abstract

*Japan's suicide rate is the highest in the developed world. Despite being a nation famous for its economic prosperity, Japan has a multitude of issues relating to social development. Patrick Smith (1997) writes about 'the samurai who carries a briefcase', a visual metaphor which effectively conveys the cultural schizophrenia plaguing the mentalities of modern Japanese society. The convergence of deep-rooted traditional Japanese philosophies with the modern capitalist mindset has resulted in a very unique and convoluted moral code among the contemporary Japanese population. Unlike Western society, suicide carries no social stigma and at times is even celebrated; a mindset inherited from generations of honourable self-sacrifice instilled by the samurai code. This research paper explores two famous pieces of Japanese popular media, and assesses the ways in which representations of suicide are produced and consumed. By focussing on the identification of geographies of suicide, spatially and temporally specific Japanese social maladies, and the sensationalisation of suicide in the media, this paper provides a comprehensive insight into the social realities reflected in these fictional works.*

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## Table of Contents

### Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Suicide: A Global Concern	1
1.2 Japan: A Suicide Nation?	2
1.3 Media and Suicide Contagion	5
1.4 Spaces of Suicide in Japan	7
1.5 My Research Aims	9

### Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Defining Suicide	10
2.2 Altruistic Suicide	11
2.3 The Business of Suicide	12
2.4 Economic Suicide and Japan's Suicide Boom	13
2.5 Japanese Psychiatry	15
2.6 Spirituality and Suicide	16
2.7 Japanese Intergenerational Change	18
2.8 School and Suicide	18
2.9 Reporting on Suicide: An Overview	20

2.10 Reporting on Suicide in Japan	21
2.11 Japanese Media and Suicide Contagion	22
2.12 Suicide and the Internet	23
2.13 Fictional Media and Suicide	24
2.14 Geographies of Fictional Media	25
2.15 Japanese Suicide ‘Hotspots’	26
2.16 Geographies of Suicide	27
Chapter 3 Methodology	
3.1 Methodology	29
3.2 Research Methods	29
3.3 Limitations	31
Chapter 4 Discussion	
4.1 Deconstructing Japanese Popular Fictional Media	32
4.2 Jisatsu Circle	33
4.3 Paranoia Agent	44
Chapter 5 Conclusion	58
Bibliography	
Figures	

## Media

<u>Figures</u>	<u>Page</u>
1.1 'Seppuku'	3
1.2 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa'	4
1.3 'Hanging'	6
1.4 'Aokigahara Forest'	8
4.1 'Chūō Line Suicide'	34
4.2 'Media Contagion'	35
4.3 'Ruins.com'	36
4.4 'Dessert'	37
4.5 'Self-Harm'	38
4.6 'Suicide Demons'	40
4.7 'Rooftop Suicide'	40
4.8 'Censorship'	41
4.9 'Romanticisation of Suicide'	43
4.10 'Smiling Saya'	43
4.11 'Tsukiko Sagi'	44
4.12 'Suicide Saturation'	46

4.13	'Ijime'	48
4.14	'Exam Hell'	51
4.15	'Karojisatsu'	52
4.16	'Suicide Forum'	54
4.17	'Train Suicide'	56
4.18	'Forest Suicide'	57



## 1.1 Suicide: A Global Concern

'Suicide' is universally defined as the intentional act of taking one's life. The reasons which drive individual human beings to terminate their own existence are personal and complex, and therefore difficult to analyse under a broad, generalised scope. What is apparent, however, is that suicide is a global social phenomenon, and an underexplored cause of death among humans. The most recent data on global suicide rates published by the World Health Organisation shows an estimated 804,000 suicides worldwide in 2012; approximately 2,203 suicides per day. These figures represent an average global annual age-standardised suicide rate of 11.4 per 100,000 in the global population; 15.0 in males and 8.0 in females. When the average global suicide rate is compared with the suicide rate of the nation of Japan, questions are raised. Japan's annual age-standardised suicide rate is 18.5 per 1,000 in the population; 26.9 in males and 10.1 in females (WHO, 2012). The suicide rate in Japan is almost twice the average global suicide rate.

Suicide rates tend to vary greatly between different countries for religious, cultural and economic reasons. Generally, suicide rates tend to be higher in developing countries with a low gross national product per capita. Difficulties such as high levels of poverty, deprivation, and inadequate healthcare systems, to name but a few, significantly lower the quality of life of the population. Japan however, is described as a 'high income' nation by the World Bank. Japan ranks 17th place in regards to highest national suicide rate across the globe, but more notably, Japan's suicide rate is the highest of all developed countries (World Bank, 2014; WHO, 2012). Countries

which possess a higher suicide rate than Japan include Guyana, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Uganda and India. All these nations are developing, and apart from a high suicide rate, appear to share no similarities with Japan, a nation of 'efficiency and technology' (Smith, 1997: 33). However, despite Japan's status as a wealthy and technologically powerful nation, the suicide rate is 60% above the global average, double that of the United States of America, and triple that of the United Kingdom (McKenna, 2015: 293-294).

### 1.2 Japan: A Suicide Nation?

Japanese culture is unique, whether it is cuisine, art, music, traditional clothing or sport. Unfortunately, not all aspects of culture are necessarily positive, which is the case relating to Japanese historical and cultural conceptualisations toward suicide. Japanese suicide has been deemed impossible to compare with Western civilisation, as suicide in Japan is part of a 'distinct moral creed' (Littlejohn, 1910-1911). Several factors influence this normalisation, and at times 'romanticization of suicide' in Japan (West, 2005: 261). The Japanese culture of self-destruction has been attributed to the advent of Buddhism in Japan in A.D. 285 by Jack Seward (1968), which is significant, as neither of the most popular Japanese religions of Shinto and Buddhism prohibit suicide. It was against this religious backdrop that the samurai code 'bushidō', meaning 'the way of the warrior' and the act of 'seppuku' or 'hara-kiri' which means 'stomach cutting', came into existence. This honourable act of self-disembowelment is shown in the woodblock print in Figure 1.1. Despite the samurai way of life being outlawed in 1876, by World War II this act of self-sacrifice returned in the form of 'kamikaze' suicide pilots, 'shinyo' suicide boats, 'kaiten' suicide

submarines and 'fukuryu' suicide divers or 'human mines'. Evidently, Japanese moral code revolved around the idea of suicide, and this attitude has been carried into a modern Japanese context.



**Figure 1.1 'Seppuku'**

Woodblock Print Depicting a Samurai Warrior about to Perform 'Seppuku' - Kunikazu Utagawa.

A fundamental divergence in the Japanese interpretation of suicide from the rest of the world, combined with the unique stresses of everyday life in modern Japan, has put its population at particular risk of suicide. Patrick Smith (1997) describes the Japanese as being in an 'eternal state of becoming', never truly reaching fulfilment and forever suspended like the waves in the famous woodblock print 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa' by Katsushika Hokusai seen in Figure 1.2 (4). This can be attributed to Westernisation and industrialisation in Japan, which caused a shift in moral values; replacing group solidarity with individuality, and therefore causing social alienation and 'moral deterioration' within the next generation of the

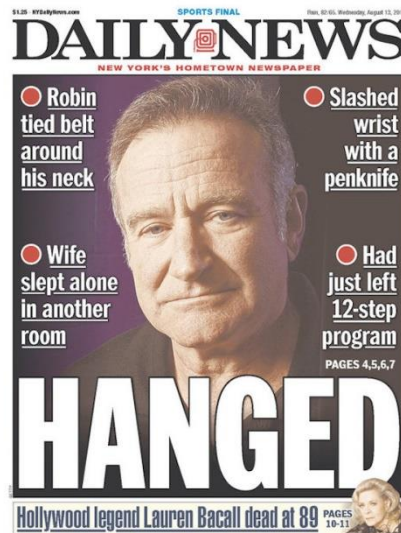
Japanese (Lebra, 1974: 90-92). The bursting of the economic bubble of the 1990s caused a spike in Japanese suicide rates, and many businessmen chose suicide as an honourable solution to their problems over declaring bankruptcy. Bankruptcy carries severe social stigma, with one former debtor comparing bankruptcy to AIDS and another suicide victim describing the declaration of bankruptcy in his suicide note as 'a cowardly act' (West, 2005: 258-259). Karô jisatsu, or 'overwork suicide' is a commonplace cause of death in Japan, where the Japanese work ethic supersedes self-preservation. Japanese suicide rates skyrocketed in 1998, and remained at an excess of 30,000 suicides a year for ten consecutive years, a figure five times higher than the number of traffic accident deaths in Japan (Kitanaka, 2009: 258). Suicide is the leading cause of death in men aged 20 to 44 years and women aged 15 to 34 years in Japan (Yamamura, 2006: 575-583). The question is raised: why are so many young Japanese people still killing themselves? Issues in Japanese psychiatry, economy, and traditional cultural practices have been identified, but media remains a very under-explored element in reasons individuals commit suicide.



**Figure 1.2 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa'**  
Woodblock Print - Katsushika Hokusai.

### 1.3 Media and Suicide Contagion

Media coverage of suicide walks a very fine line between raising awareness of the issue of suicide, and acting as a catalyst for copy-cat suicide, known as the 'Werther effect'. The name 'Werther effect' originates from the 1774 novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'The Sorrows of the Young Werther', in which the protagonist commits suicide. The novel was read widely across Europe and believed to be the first recorded example of the media's influence on copy-cat suicides (Phillips, 1974). In modern day Japan, there are no official guidelines in place for suicide journalism, and details of particular suicide cases are often explicitly reported on, such as the death of the Japanese musician Hideto Matsumoto, known as 'Hide' in 1998 (Thorsen, 2006: 5). Details of Hideto's death were documented in the news media in a sensational and dramatic manner, and the following day three young fans committed copy-cat suicide (Seno, 2006). Similarly, in 2008 a 'nationwide outbreak' of hydrogen sulphide suicides, a method previously unheard of in Japan, was linked with extensive media coverage (Nakamura, 2012: 133). The charity group 'Samaritans' have suggested some media guidelines for reporting on suicide, which include avoiding sensational front page articles and descriptions of suicide methods. These were clearly neglected in the sensational news report on Robin Williams' suicide in Figure 1.3 (Samaritans, 2016). These guidelines are only suggested, however, and frequently ignored by Japanese media outlets. Mitsuhiro Nakamura (2012) notes that 'comprehensive strategies to suppress suicide epidemics' relating to media reporting are essential in Japan, as insensitive reporting can have adverse effects on the public (139).



**Figure 1.3 Hanging**

The 'Daily News', a local New York newspaper's front page story on the suicide of the famous actor Robin Williams.

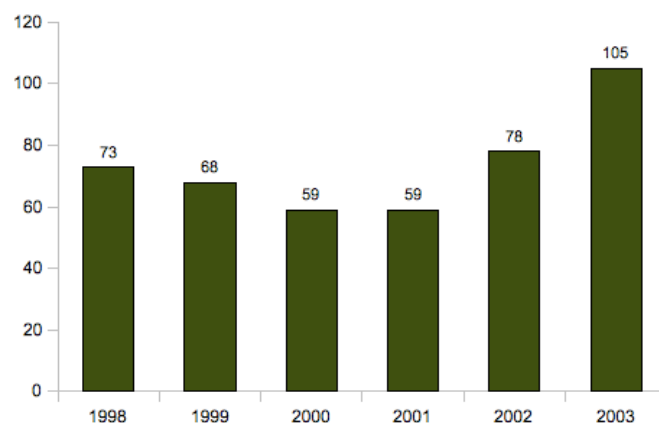
A relatively unstudied aspect of suicide representation in Japanese media includes that of fictional media: film, literature, art, and pop culture such as Japanese animations: 'anime' and Japanese comics: 'manga'. These fictional accounts of suicide are guilty of glamourising and aestheticising the act of self-sacrifice. Manga has been described by Frederik Schodt (1996) as 'peering into the unvarnished, unretouched reality of the Japanese mind', highlighting the significant insight these fictional works provide into understanding Japanese mentality (31). It is thought that news reports have a greater suicide contagion effect than fictional media, but since the impact of fictional stories on suicide rates is an under researched realm, this conclusion is premature (Gould, 2003: 1269; Martin, 1998: 54). Few studies have been conducted on copy-cat suicides following the airing of fictional media, such as Schmidtke and Häfner's (1988) research on the increase in railway suicides of the specific gender and age demographic represented in the six episode German television series 'Death of a Student'. Hawton and colleagues (1999) also provided

evidence of suicide contagion following the airing of the English hospital drama 'Casualty', which featured a paracetamol overdose. In the week following the episode's airing, self-poisoning hospital representations increased by 17%, with 20% of these patients claiming to have been influenced by the show (Hawton, 2006: 168). Although no comprehensive studies have been conducted on the increase in copy-cat suicides following the airing or publication of specific examples of Japanese fictional media, it is safe to assume a similar 'dose-response relationship' based on global patterns (Phillips, 1992). It is important to note that youths are at greater risk of suicide following the exposure of suicide in the media (Gould, 1990: 211-212). The high rate of suicide among Japanese youth, the influenceability of youth by media, and the abundance of graphic depictions of suicide in Japanese media raises the question, in what way do Japanese representations of suicide differ from the rest of the world?

#### 1.4 Spaces of Suicide in Japan

Returning to the global variations of suicide rates, we see that Japanese suicide rates are the highest in the developed world. The geographies of suicidal behaviour are an understudied aspect of suicidology, focussing not only on successful suicides but also suicide attempts in order to establish a socio-spatial understanding of the phenomenon (Stevenson, 2015). In the case of Japan, both these areas are neglected, especially the views of suicide survivors, despite Japan's suicide epidemic. The study in variations of suicide rates on a national level, or at so called spatial 'suicide hotspots' within Japan has been given some attention. The most popular suicide destination in Japan is Aokigahara Forest, nicknamed the 'Suicide Forest'.

Annual figures of suicides in the forest have stopped being published by police authorities in an attempt to prevent further 'cultural memory' being attached to the location, turning it into a 'magnet for the despairing' (Roarty, 2012: 7). As seen in Figure 1.4, the last published number of annual suicides in the forest was in 2003, where the figure stood at approximately 105 annual deaths, a dramatic increase from the 78 deaths in 2002 and 59 in 2001 (Aokigahara Forest, 2003). The high number of deaths in Aokigahara Forest skews the annual numbers of suicides in the prefecture of Yamanashi, which stood at 36.1 per 100,000 in 2011 compared to 23.7 in Tokyo and 21.7 in Osaka (Kyodo, 2012). Why are people drawn to Aokigahara Forest to commit suicide? There is a wealth of media focussing on the eerie aura the forest possesses, such as the 'The Complete Manual of Suicide', claiming Aokigahara Forest to be 'the perfect place to die' (Tsurumi, 1993). Is it possible that Aokigahara Forest and others have become imagined spaces of suicide due to representations of the locations in the media?



**Figure 1.4 Aokigahara Forest**

Number of Suicide Corpses Found in Aokigahara Forest between 1998 and 2003.



### 1.5 My Research Aims

The aim of my research is to assess whether the 'heroic representation of suicide' in Japanese fictional media has resulted in a romanticised and socio-spatial understanding of self-sacrifice in Japan, uncharacteristic of other advanced societies (Roarty, 2012: 6). Combining my knowledge of Japanese culture, interest in fictional media, and awareness of the social issue of suicide, the research questions I will explore and answer are as follows:

- 1) What specific geographies of suicide can be identified in Japanese fictional media?
- 2) What spatially and temporally specific societal ailments contribute to a culture of suicide reflected in Japanese fictional media?
- 3) Does Japanese fictional media deal with suicide in a sensitive or sensationalist manner?

## 2.1 Defining Suicide

Suicide is a subject open to various interpretations as it lies 'at the crossroads' of the religious and secular, public and private, ancient and contemporary, and philosophical and medical domains; effectively conveyed in 'Histories of Suicide' by Wright & Weaver (2009: 3). Kleinman (2002) highlights how suicide is not simply a medical issue, but a social, moral and political issue. Émile Durkheim was the first sociologist to study suicide from an analytical and scientific perspective, as seen in his 1897 book 'Suicide'. Durkheim rejected the idea of suicide as an individual act, and instead viewed it as a social act based on a broad framework of societal structures. This opinion was in opposition with those of psychiatrists at the time, such as Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, who viewed suicide as a medical issue and an irrational decision, made by a 'diseased brain' (Esquirol, 1845: 22).

Suicide for Durkheim was a reasonable reaction to a poor quality of life, and a symptom of 'societal dysfunction' (Wright & Weaver, 2009: 4). Durkheim's suicide was caused by an excess or lack of either 'regulation' or 'integration'. This sociological assessment was given an economic dimension in 1974 by Hamermesh and Soss, where suicide became a rational behaviour if committed to maximise an individual's 'discounted expected lifetime utility' (Chen, 2008: 143). Later, Yang (1989) combined Durkheim's sociological insight and Hamermesh and Soss' economic analysis of suicide, by considering factors such as age, religion and divorce rates in influencing suicide. Despite the age of Durkheim's theories, his work is still very relevant and has been applied to a modern Japanese context by Tony McKenna (2015), in his Marxist analysis of Japan's high suicide rate.

## 2.2 Altruistic Suicide

Durkheim's 'altruistic suicide' is of particular interest to my research, as this type of self-sacrifice is characteristic of societies where community membership is valued more than individual self-worth, and therefore deemed 'praiseworthy', as it is committed for the benefit of others (Durkheim, 1897: 222). Altruistic suicide was very common in traditional Japanese settings, particularly in the warrior code 'bushidō' expressed in Yamamoto Tsunetomo's 'Hagakure': The Book of the Samurai (1906), in which he describes the Way of the Samurai and honour being 'found in death' (25). Also, the 'sacrificial suicides' of over 5,000 Kamikaze pilots in World War II were a result of this trend of altruistic suicide in Japan (Coleman, 1987). There is a wealth of information on Japan's rich history of cultural traditions involving suicide, which may be to blame for the modern day normalised and aestheticised view of suicide. Such traditions include the following: self-disembowelment of samurais ('seppuku'), requested abandonment of elders in forests ('ubasute'), double suicide of lovers ('jōshi'), group suicide pacts ('shinju') and family suicide ('ikka shinju') (Roarty, 2012: 4; Ikunaga, 2013: 282).

The altruistic nature of these traditional values of honourable self-sacrifice have become embedded in modern day Japan, as people continue to kill themselves for the wellbeing of others. Family burden, or 'meiwaku' is reduced by taking one's own life, in the opinion of many (West, 2005: 248). Chikako Ozawa-De Silva's 2010 paper on the phenomenon of shared death and suicide pacts in Japan emphasises how traditional fears of 'kodoku na shi' or 'lonely death' still exist in this modern Japanese society, where 'selfhood' is strongly linked with the experience of others (Silva, 2010:

392; Long, 2001: 273). Internet suicide pacts ('netto shinju') or 'net suicide' as coined by Ayumi Naito (2007) are unique to Japan, and represent the marrying of traditional Japanese group suicide practices with modern technology. A Japanese dictionary called 'Koujien', defines 'shinju' as a 'social obligation to others', highlighting the sociality and altruism often involved in self-sacrifice (Cho, 2004: 2). Individualism is not characteristic of the Japanese, evident in the fact individual Japanese people were 'nameless' until the late 19th century (Smith, 1997: 41).

### 2.3 The Business of Suicide

Japanese suicide rates are highly influenced by money. Issues in Japanese insolvency law, consumer finance and life insurance companies are explored in depth by Mark West's 2005 work on 'Debt Suicide', where he studies the stigmatisation of mental health and bankruptcy. Japan is a nation where admissions of financial problems are disgraceful, especially the declaration of bankruptcy which is considered 'cowardly' for a family. Suicide is a more honourable alternative of financial problem solving, often allowing the family of the deceased to receive a life insurance payout (West, 2005: 259-260). Rene Duignan comments on the need for the life insurance companies to 'stop incentivising suicide' and contributing to the idea of suicide as an honourable investment opportunity; at least 6% of all life insurance payouts in Japan are openly suicide related (Duignan, 2012 ; Amamiya: 2002).

Many Japanese debtors seek help from consumer finance companies, which often differ little from organised crime and 'sarakin' (salaryman financing). These loans, with their high interest rates of up to 10,000% per annum were the causative factor in so many deaths that police agencies began collecting data on 'sarakin suicides'

(West, 2005: 229-230). The process of declaring bankruptcy is so onerous and stigmatised that suicide becomes 'a natural, logical, and permanently available response to experience and to the exhaustion of life's possibilities' (Richie, 1998). The toxic relationship between capital and suicide in Japan is encapsulated in the discovery made in 2005 by the Japanese government of over 5,000 life insurance policies, which were paid out to consumer finance companies rather than the families of the deceased. The vulnerability of the debtors was exploited by the consumer finance companies, and viewed as an investment opportunity (Duignan, 2012). Japanese social and cultural values are heavily reflected in the statutes surrounding insolvency, life insurance and consumer finance, and fuel suicide as much as mental illness.

#### 2.4 Economic Suicide and Japan's Suicide Boom

Joe Chen's (2012) study on recession and unemployment in Japan is a valuable resource, analysing the correlation between high suicide rates and unemployment following the economic downturn in 1997 and 1998. After this date, three changes occurred in Japan's suicide rates: the rates increased dramatically, remained in excess of 30,000 suicides annually for ten years, and the number of young suicide victims increased greatly (Chen, 2012: 75). Junko Kitanaka's (2009) research hones in on contrasting theories of suicide in Japan: 'Suicide of Resolve' or 'Kakugo no Jisatsu' versus 'Overwork Suicide', or 'Karōjisatsu' (257). Suicide in Japan has been conceptualised as a 'culturally sanctioned act of individual freedom' by the public, and has been normalised as a legitimate solution to a problem imposed by society, and an expression of free will in the form of 'voluntary death' (Pinguet, 1994).

However, the suicide boom of the late 1990s was evidently a social pandemic, rather than widespread resolve. Yuko Kawanishi's (2008) work on understanding the phenomenon of young Japanese 'corporate warriors' working themselves to death, provides valuable insight on *karōjisatsu*, focussing on 'kaishatism', or 'companyism' suicide. Many workers are peer pressured to conform to the illegal unpaid overtime practices of 'service overtime' and 'white-collar exemption'. (66; 68-69). Patrick Smith (1997) studies the importance of lingering feudal values in modern day Japanese work ethic.

Tony McKenna (2015) highlights the dangers of 'shafu' or 'company spirit' in creating a heightened sense of failure in the Japanese workplace, with job loss often being compared to the betrayal of a lover (Wehrfritz, 2001). Excessive company spirit and emotional involvement in the workplace also creates an environment for *karōjisatsu* or simply 'karoshi', or 'overwork death', caused by physical ailments such as cardiovascular disease (300). Many Japanese workers are physically and psychologically bound to their work at the expense of their own lives, as seen in the infamous example of *karōjisatsu* by Ōshima Ichirō (Kitanaka 2009: 268). The excessive integration in workplace relationships began in 1938 with the destruction and transformation of workers unions into compulsory unions organised by company affiliation; a product of 'welfare corporatism' (Lincoln, 1990: 3). Patrick Smith (1997) described these unions as 'grand illusions' of 'coerced calm', which appear to protect the rights of the workers, but in reality act as social regulation, turning Japanese workers into mere Foucauldian 'docile bodies' (23-24). Younger generations suffer from the 'destabilization of the economy' and experience alienation and loss of

'ikigai', or 'purpose' in the job market. These economic pressures ultimately contribute to the rise in suicide rates among youths (McKenna, 2015: 301; Zeng 1998). Hamermesh and Soss' (1974) 'economic theory of suicide' as a rational choice presents the flaws of viewing suicide exclusively as a consequence of mental health, as it can hide tangible socioeconomic ailments within Japanese everyday life which provoke mental illness (Chen, 2008: 143).

## 2.5 Japanese Psychiatry

Junko Kitanaka's (2012) book 'Depression in Japan' focuses on the 'medicalization of suicide', which is the shifting of blame to biological pathologies within individuals and away from issues in Japanese everyday life (Kitanaka, 2009: 273). Japanese psychiatry is guilty of a genetically deterministic view of suicide, which ignores the relationship between culture and suicide, an area explored by David Lester (2007) in a number of case studies across the globe. Psychiatric practice in Japan is characterised by long waiting lists for mere minutes of consultation and medication management, a process described by Kari Huus as 'mechanical non-human communication' (Huus, 2013). Stress and depression in Japan were considered quantifiable through a 'stress evaluation table', a process which demonstrates the stigmatised and standardised view of human suffering by medical professionals through the allocation of 'points' per stressful life event (Kitanaka, 2009: 269-270).

Kitanaka's research shows a gradual change in the attitude towards suicide within Japanese society and psychiatry, kick-started by the infamous court case of Ôshima Ichirô, an overworked employee who took his own life and whose family sued his workplace. Suicide slowly began to be viewed as a 'social causality' caused by

depression or 'psychological morbidity', resulting from stressful work environments and effort-reward imbalance, rather than an admirable act of free will (Kitanaka, 2009: 269; Nakao, 2008: 315). However, Japan still remains a nation where people are treated as 'economic animals', and psychiatric practice still reflects the outdated values of the past (Smith, 1996: 31). Elements of Japanese culture such as the self-restraint and composure of the samurai and the vigilant work ethic of the Japanese businessman have been assessed by Steven Stack (1996) from a psychiatric perspective, revealing a tendency for 'internalized aggression' and self-destructive tendencies in the Japanese psyche (134). Mutsuhiro Nakao (2008) identifies issues within Japanese psychiatry and suggests methods necessary to prevent suicide, revolving around the ideas of pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention within work and community-based suicide schemes (318).

## 2.6 Spirituality and Suicide

Religion has had a strong influence over Japanese acceptance of suicidal behaviour. The Shinto faith is the ethnic religion of Japan, and is old as the nation itself. Yoshihiro Kaneko (2009) assesses the Shinto attitude towards suicide, which revolves around the idea that humans return to nature after death and suicide poses no exception to this process. The good are neither rewarded, nor the bad punished in this afterlife, as they are in Christianity's 'heaven' and 'hell', which suggests that even if suicide was considered a 'bad death', there would be no posthumous repercussions (Picone, 2012: 394). Buddhism is the most widespread religious belief in Japan today, and is characterised by views of death as purifying and rebirth (Stack, 1996: 134). Some Buddhist texts praise self-sacrifice, and notions of rebirth blind



many from the permanence of their actions, as seen in Masaaki Kato's (1974) interview with three surviving 'kaiten' divers who believed they were immortal (360). The notion of 'pseudosuicide' relates to suicidal behaviour influenced by such religious beliefs, and highlights the complicated nature of defining suicide if the victim does not believe they are ending their life (Kato, 1974: 360).

An individual's 'manner of dying' at the moment of death is more important than how one lived their life, in Japanese religion (Becker, 1990: 547). Mary Picone's (2012) paper on 'Suicide and the Afterlife' assesses early religious narratives' impact on modern day Japanese spirituality, and how these values often condone the act of self-murder. A unique aspect of Japanese spirituality is the belief in 'kami' (Japanese gods), spirits, and the afterlife by people who are not religious (Picone, 2012: 397). Many Japanese people strongly believe in the idea of karma and fate, and often blame misfortune in their lives on 'spiritual interference', or 'reishô', due to acts committed in their previous life. This acceptance of curses and 'chains of causality' within family lines has had a role in many Japanese suicides, including extreme cases of 'ikka jisatsu', or 'family suicide', committed in the attempt to save future generations of a family from a so-called 'karmic mountain of retribution' (Picone, 2012: 399-400). Suicide is often seen as the only solution to a life of misfortune, by many overworked and depressed Japanese people, but, as noted by Carl Becker (1990), Buddhism sees death as a transition, rather than an end to life, which may provide a sense of comfort to conflicted individuals.

## 2.7 Japanese Intergenerational Change

Takeie Sugiyama Lebra's (1974) study on the shift in moral values in Japan as a result of 'techno-environmental change' and industrialisation is valuable research explaining the alienation of youths in contemporary Japanese society and creation of 'counterculture' (92). This era of 'unprecedented affluence, security, freedom and leisure' came as a culture shock to many young adults, especially in relation to Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' (Lebra, 1974: 92; Maslow, 1943). Lebra's study (1974) powerfully explains the creation of a culture of high parental expectations in Japan, often far beyond the capabilities of the child. This feeling of failure to meet the expectations of others is carried into adulthood, contributing to Japan's culture of overwork. The social phenomenon of 'hikikomori', coined by Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saito in 1998, in his book 'Social Withdrawal: A Neverending Adolescence', refers to reclusive adolescents in modern day Japan. This unique trend in Japanese youth is a result of alienation and inability to cope with the stresses of modern life, but also of increased prosperity for families, to be able to afford to provide for an unproductive member of society. This is a result of the process of Westernisation and moral change in Japan, which Patrick Smith (1997) describes as 'cultural schizophrenia' and the creation of the 'Invisible Japanese' (22;7).

## 2.8 School and Suicide

The education system is another realm of Japanese life which fails to function on the behalf of the people, evident in the blatant statement made by Japan's first education minister in 1885, Mori Arinori, that Japanese education is intended to 'manufacture the persons required by the State', rather than create individuals

gifted in the arts and sciences. Patrick Smith's (1997) deconstruction of the Japanese education system provides a Western perspective on the 'battlefield' which Japanese youth face on a daily basis (79). The term 'kyoiku' used for 'education' in Japan is comprised of 'kyo', meaning 'to impart' and 'iku', meaning 'to develop'. In reality, Japanese education only focusses on 'kyo', as students are forced to accumulate excessive amounts of knowledge which can be repeated on command, but not understood. As a result of Japan's inept education system, 'narrow, machinelike people' are generated rather than 'exploring intellectuals' (Smith, 1997: 82-83).

Competition between students is fierce, resulting in high rates of bullying, or 'ijime' in schools, with at least 22,000 cases reported annually (Smith, 1997: 82). Bullying in Japan is unique, in that it is almost exclusively psychological and 'collective', meaning bullying is often a large group or class against one individual (Salvaggio, 2013). Such behaviour encapsulates the deep-rooted desire for conformity in Japan, as many bullies merely follow suite to avoid being bullied themselves, for expressing individuality. Bullying, suicide, juvenile delinquency, truancy and alcoholism are rife among students, who are aware of the Japanese transitory shift from childhood freedom to a submissive adulthood, a conversion described by Smith (1997) as 'the process by which choices are narrowed until there are none' (78). Jon Woronoff (1991) writes of the mental anguish experienced by students in the 'rat race' of Japanese education, and how 'exam hell' is a Japanese-specific reality (119). The ultimate rejection of the highly flawed education system by Japanese youths is manifested in 'tokokyohi', or 'school refusal', a phenomenon studied in detail by Shoko Yoneyama (2000).

## 2.9 Reporting on Suicide: An Overview

David Phillips' groundbreaking 1974 paper on copy-cat suicides, or what Phillips' coined as the 'Werther effect' was the first ever study published, on the link between media and suicide rate. Analysing the suicide rate following the publication of front-page suicide stories between 1947 and 1968 in Britain and the United States, Phillips' research shows how the more publicity a suicide case is given, the more suicides are found in the period following publication. Loren Coleman explores this theme of 'copy-cat suicides' in her 2004 book, 'The Copycat Effect'. Phillips' paper inspired many studies on the influence of particular suicide reports on the immediate suicide rate in certain spatial localities, or 'geographies of suicide'. In 1982, Bollen and Phillips produced a similar study with similar results, assessing the influence of television news reports on suicide rates. In Graham Martin's (1998) assessment of the link between suicide and media, he refers to the limited research carried out on the influence of media on the suicide rates of those under 25, the group most affected by media influence. Some nations recognised repetitive suicidal behaviour and made efforts to enforce media regulations, such as Austria. Gernot Sonneck's (1994) study on the sensationalist portrayal of suicide on the Viennese subway in Austrian newspapers from 1984 showed that following the publication of media regulations in 1987, the suicide rates on the subway line dramatically decreased within six months. This has resulted in the view that rather than dramatic front-page headlines and detailed descriptions sensationalising suicide, the focus needs to be shifted towards encouraging people to seek help (Hawton, 2006: 17; Phillips, 1992).

## 2.10 Reporting on Suicide in Japan

Japan has no strict official media regulations relating to how suicide should be presented across mass media platforms, despite its high suicide rate. Bill Norris (2006) examines global variations in media guidelines for suicide broadcasting, and despite many nations lacking such guidelines, the issue of suicide is still treated sensitively, or in some cases not mentioned at all. Japanese newspapers retain the privacy of suicide victims, but unfortunately frequently report the specific details of suicide methods (Norris, 2006: 5). Privacy of individuals is completely ignored in cases of celebrity suicides, as explored by Michiko Ueda (2014). The suicide of a young pop singer called Yukiko Okada in 1986 caused such a media sensation that the Japanese Suicide Prevention Association contacted various media companies in an attempt to cease coverage, as so many youths were committing copy-cat suicide. This phenomenon was so prevalent that the neologism 'Yukiko Syndrome' was constructed (Hagihara, 2007: 1). Sensational news coverage of the suicides of celebrities is associated with a 5% increase in the total number of suicides on the day of publication of the story (Ueda, 2014: 627). Annette Beautrais (2008) provides an insightful account on the representation of suicide in Japanese media, stating that often suicide reports in Asian countries are 'more graphic, explicit, and simplistic than in Europe and the United States' (39). The relationship between such graphic and inappropriate suicide reports and suicide rate is an area which is being increasingly studied.

### 2.11 Japanese Media and Suicide Contagion

Analytical quantitative studies have been conducted on the impact of media reporting about specific suicide methods and the number of subsequent imitative suicides in Japan. In 2008, a nationwide outbreak of hydrogen sulphide suicides (HSS) occurred, with annual HSS figures in 2008 reaching 1,056. This was a huge increase from the 19 cases of HSS in 2007, when this suicide method was incredibly rare (Nakamura, 2012: 133). There have been multiple studies conducted on this incident, including Mitsuhiro Nakamura's (2012) research on the role of newspapers and the internet on the influence of HSS cases in Japan, and Akihito Hagihara's (2013) research on newspaper media only with emphasis on front page stories about HSS. Both studies found that the numbers of cases of HSS in Japan peaked at the same time as HSS related internet searches and publications of HSS newspaper reports. Charcoal burning suicides in Japan were another epidemic influenced by media attention, causing the occurrence of copy-cat suicides, a case study explored by Eiji Yoshioka (2014). After the publication of a news story in 2003 about three strangers in Japan committing suicide by charcoal burning, the method became a new 'disturbing trend' in group suicide pacts across Japan (Yoshioka, 2014: 274). Another relatively rare suicide method in Japan which became popular after excessive media attention was the consumption of the herbicide, 'Paraquat', as seen in Yoshitomo Takahashi's 1998 study. These examples of media reports in Japan influencing the rates of individual methods of suicide, demonstrate an issue in the suggestibility of the Japanese people, and confirm the need for 'responsible and cautious' reporting and media regulations to be put in place (Ueda, 2014: 623).

## 2.12 Suicide and the Internet

The internet is an incredibly valuable resource in modern day society, however, it has what Amanda Aitken (2009) described as a 'darker side' in her overview of the relationship between suicide and the internet (40). Lucy Biddle (2008) conducted a systematic assessment of the nature of available websites relating to suicide, and found that out of the 240 most popular suicide websites she analysed, approximately half were 'pro-suicide', and provided factual information on various suicide methods (Luxton, 2012: 195). David Luxton's (2012) study assesses the link between social media usage and suicide. Bullying or 'ijime' is a serious and prominent issue among Japanese youth. Technological advancement has exacerbated the problem, giving rise to 'cyberbullying', which often causes the phenomenon of 'cyberbulicide'. This has been studied in depth by Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin (2010) and their work shows that school children who experienced cyberbullying were almost twice as likely to commit suicide, as those who were not victims (Luxton, 2012: 196; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

'Cybersuicide pacts' or 'netto shinjū' are another new phenomenon, which differ from traditional suicide pacts in that the pacts are mostly formed by complete strangers who meet online (Luxton, 2012: 196). The first documented case of 'cybersuicide' was reported in 2000 in Japan, where it has now become a common form of suicide (Naito, 2007). The accessibility of harmful information relating to suicide, along with the easy access to the large number of unregulated online pharmacies is another dangerous aspect of the internet. Stephen Lewis' (2011) study on the accessibility of self-harm videos on YouTube showed that over 58% of

self-injury videos were accessible to all age groups. The accessibility of these noxious videos to underage viewers is damaging due to 'media contagion' effect's strong influence over youths (Gould, 2003). Yotaro Katsumata's (2008) study shows a clear link between suicidal ideation in Japanese adolescents and electronic media use, as does Hajime Sueki's (2014) study on the relationship between suicide-related Twitter usage and suicidal behaviour among Japanese youth. It is evident that younger generations are at greater risk of the suggestibility of suicide-related websites and bulletin boards.

### 2.13 Fictional Media and Suicide

An area which remains understudied is that of fictional media's influence on suicide rates. Schmidtke and Häfner (1988) provide a valuable study on suicide contagion following the airing of the German television series 'Death of a Student', as did Hawton and colleagues (1999) for the English television show 'Casualty'. There is an abundance of suicide-related fictional media available in Japan, acting as a social commentary for the 'bleak picture' of contemporary Japanese life (Ozawa-de Silva, 2010: 398). Unfortunately, this wealth of fictional media relating to suicide has remained incredibly under-researched in regards to its potential influence over vulnerable Japanese youth. Studies by Frederik Schodt (1996), Ozawa-de Silva (2010) and Susan Napier (2005) highlight the role of 'anime' and 'manga' in depicting the struggles of modern Japanese life. Similarly to news reporting, it is essential that suicide is neither normalised, romanticised nor sensationalised, as the majority of Japanese popular fictional media is produced for the youth of Japan who are most susceptible to the influence of suicide in the media (Gould, 2003: 1276). Madelyn



Gould wrote in 2003 about the need for media guidelines on the fictional portrayal of suicide. However, 13 years later such guidelines have not yet been developed (1275). Ozawa-de Silva (2010) notes the 'negative influence' the media has on young people, which is evident in multiple quantitative studies, but none yet specific to Japan.

#### 2.14 Geographies of Fictional Media

Fictional media and popular culture are valuable resources, reflecting current 'contextual, social, cultural, and political' values, on top of an aesthetic significance (Whitlock and Poletti, 2008: ix). These static depictions of life in fictional media can be considered a 'map of time', as they reflect current attitudes of a nation at a particular time and space (Raeburn, 2004: 11). Jason Dittmer's work on the geographies of comic books and the importance of visual representations of space in the human geography discipline are central to my research (Dittmer, 2015). Popular culture is a compelling indicator of the 'identity' of the location in which it was produced (Dittmer, 2010a). In the case of Japan, the Japanese people should not be considered 'external' to the 'discursive construction' of Japanese life within the comics, as it is they who inspire such specific fictionalities (Hartley, 1992: 105). A connection with the readership is essential for the success of a comic, and the popularity of manga in Japan is testament to the personal link many Japanese feel with these carefully produced, fictional narratives. Frederik Schodt (1996) commented on the primitive and authentic nature of manga, in conveying the emotions of Japanese society, a statement supported further by Edward Said's comment on comics being an 'antidote' to the biased geopolitical and cultural

geographies suggested by the 'media saturated world' of global news reporting (Said, 2001: iii). Similarly, the geographies of film are studied in detail by Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon (2002) and Stuart Aitken and Deborah Dixon (2006), highlighting the close relationship between the fictional 'reel' world and the 'real' world (Aitken & Dixon, 2006: 327).

### 2.15 Japanese Suicide 'Hotspots'

The variation of suicide rates on a national level is another neglected topic of research in Japan. Despite limited research, the development of certain suicide hotspots in Japan has been attributed to the influence of media. Sinead Roarty (2012) explores how 'cultural memory' is associated with specific locations via glamorised portrayals in Japanese film and literature, which give these sites a certain 'potency' and 'pull' (1). There are certain 'suicide hotspots' in Japan which people are drawn to, such as Aokigahara Forest, nicknamed the 'Suicide Forest' at the base of Mount Fuji. One of the main reasons this area has become 'impregnated with a history of suicide' is due to portrayals of the forest in the media (Roarty, 2012: 1). Seichō Matsumoto's 1960 novel 'Kuroi Jukai' or 'Sea of Trees', features two lovers committing suicide in the forest, followed by the publication of Wataru Tsurumi's DIY guidebook 'The Complete Manual of Suicide', which describes Aokigahara Forest as 'the perfect place to die' (Tsurumi, 1993). Other Japanese suicide hotspots include Tōjinbō Cliffs, which became popular after the publication of Jun Takami's famous book 'From the Edge of Death' in 1964, and also Cape Ashizuri, which became a popular site for self-sacrifice after *Tamiya Torahiko's* 1949 book '*Cape Ashizuri*' was published (Duignan, 2012). Loren Coleman (2004) explores the phenomenon of

'copy-cat suicides' and notes the crater of Mount Mihara volcano on the Japanese island of Izu Ōshima as another famous suicide hotspot in Japan. This suicide hotspot developed through inappropriate news reporting on the suicide of Kiyoko Matsumoto in 1933, an event so heavily publicised that in 1933 alone 944 people committed suicide here, and it was renamed to 'Suicide Point', perpetuating further association with suicide to the location (Vitelli, 2015).

### 2.16 Geographies of Suicide

Few studies have been conducted on the geographies of suicide, and what few studies there are specifically relate to the identification of 'suicide hotspots' based on numbers of suicides in certain locations. This quantitative study of suicide and spatiality has yet to be conducted in Japan, but can be seen in Cameron Stark's (2004) study on the age, method and geography of suicides in Scotland, and Shu-Sen Chang's (2011) study on spatial patterning of suicides in Taiwan. These are just two examples of the numerical and clinical attitudes surrounding the relatively unstudied field of geographies of suicide. Olivia Stevenson (2015) studies these 'geographies of intended death' with a unique perspective, believing that to truly understand the geographies of suicide, survivors must be incorporated into the study and their 'suicidal journeys' assessed from a spatial perspective. By only analysing the simple 'end point' where one commits suicide, we obscure the lived suicidal experiences of individuals (Stevenson, 2015: 189). Suicidal ideation is an active 'socio-spatial' process, and the absence of voices of the suicidal in the geographic study of suicide eludes the personal human experience involved in the decision to take one's life. Katherine Hempstead's (2006) study on 'The geography of self-injury' also highlights

the importance of researching and mapping attempted suicide, and not only completed suicide, as both show different geographical patterns. Ignoring the thought processes of suicidal individuals reduces a complex social phenomenon to a mere numerical obituary notice.

In conclusion, there has been a lot of research analysing high suicide rates in Japan, and the effects of media influence on suicide rates, but very little on the impact of Japanese media itself on the very high national suicide rates and in perpetuating certain geographies of suicide within Japan. With the help of the aforementioned resources, detailed insight into how specific examples of popular fictional media depict geographies of suicide within Japan, and how these aestheticised notions of suicide in fictional media reflect social realities will be explored in-depth.

### 3.1 Methodology

The extensive nature of the literature review in the previous chapter demonstrates the broad range of literary resources used to help formulate a broad understanding of the topic of the relationship between suicide and media in Japan. The use of secondary sources of data is essential in the study, as the research revolves around a personal critical assessment of representations of self-sacrifice and the identification of geographies of suicide in Japanese popular media. Through the accumulation of secondary knowledge in the form of quantitative academic papers assessing the relationship between suicide rates and media, qualitative academic papers studying linkages between Japanese culture, economy, and society with suicide, key sociological studies delineating suicide, cultural Japanese texts, geographic analyses of media and suicide, and public governmental statistics, that the knowledge, ability, and cognitive skills are gained to thoroughly identify and analyse the information stated in the aforementioned research aims, within Japanese popular media. These pieces of popular Japanese media alone are considered secondary sources of data, but through critical geographical and anthropological discourse analysis of the visual and textual narratives, meaning is applied to these resources.

### 3.2 Research Methods

Due to the nature of the topic, the research methods are exclusively qualitative in nature. Qualitative research methods are methods which deal with the analysis of nonnumeric data, for example: images, written texts, and visual media. Qualitative research allows for the researcher to explore a 'richness of real social experience' that quantitative number-based research often avoids (Miles & Huberman, 1994:

321). However, some researchers claim that qualitative research is hermeneutic in perspective, due to the subjectivity of individuals, and therefore it can never truly be proved as either true or false. Primary information was obtained by performing a discursive analysis of two famous pieces of Japanese popular cultural media: a popular comic or 'manga' known as 'Jisatsu Circle' (2002), written and illustrated by Furuya Usamaru, and a successful television anime series called 'Paranoia Agent' (2004), created and directed by Satoshi Kon. Jisatsu Circle manga was available for online reading on the website mangafox.me, and Paranoia Agent was viewable on YouTube. The analysis of 'Jisatsu Circle' was both textual and semiotic, as comics carry both a visual symbolic and textual significance, whilst analysis of 'Paranoia Agent' focuses on semiotic and audio content analysis, instead of textual analysis, since it is an animated cartoon. The visual aspects of both these pieces of Japanese popular media are the main research priority, as visual fields, or 'visual literacies' are a neglected aspect of the 'geographies of reading', as highlighted by Jason Dittmer (2010b), with references to his work appearing frequently throughout this discussion. (226). Dittmer's work on comic book visualities and methodologies is a priceless aid in the comprehension of the realities these fictional visual narratives often represent. Visual methodologies are a valuable way of comprehending the production of certain spaces, through the manipulation of visual landscapes and environments, but a limitation of visual semiotic analysis is that these assessments are all very theoretical. The relationship between landscapes and images is 'metaphorical at best', but findings will be supported with background research, to corroborate the claims (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005).

### 3.3 Limitations

Sharan Merriam (2009) highlights the subjectivity of my research in her claim that each individual interprets the qualitative field, in a personally unique and socially constructed way. In this respect, my research may be interpreted differently by others, but I personally feel that I researched my topic broadly enough to adequately justify all my findings. Subjectivity again becomes an issue, as I am analysing many media-reflected aspects of Japanese culture from a Western perspective, but however, this biased viewpoint may be beneficial, as it enables me to easily identify and deconstruct elements of social constructionism within Japanese society, which many Japanese people have come to accept. Another limitation lies in the fact that I have never been to Japan, and my research methods exclude first-hand experience with Japanese individuals' reception of these pieces of media, although this is beyond the scope of my study. My research relates to highly accessible pieces of Japanese media, which does not require my presence in Japan as such. However, if I have the opportunity to research my project further in the future, engaging in fieldwork in Japan would enrich my study immensely. A final limitation of my research is a result of word limit restrictions, meaning I could only focus on two pieces of Japanese popular media. However, I felt my in-depth analyses of these two pieces were preferable to partial assessments of multiple pieces.

#### 4.1 Deconstructing Japanese Popular Fictional Media: Manga and Anime

Japanese fictional popular media is an incredibly under-analysed area in modern Japanese life, and can provide an 'extremely raw and personal view of the world' from the perspective of normal working class Japanese society (Schodt, 1996, 31). Generally, Japanese comics, known as 'manga', provide a refined and organic insight into the Japanese mind through the personal artistic expression of individual designers, whereas Japanese animations, known as 'anime' are more accessible and produced by a team of artists, often from geographically diverse backgrounds for a broadcast audience. Frederik Schodt's iconic 1996 publication 'Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga' compares the act of reading manga to that of 'peering into the unvarnished, unretouched reality of the Japanese mind' (31). Such a description emphasises the priceless nature of Japanese popular media in reflecting the cultural, religious, sociological and psychological values of the Japanese population. Jason Dittmer (2010) comments on the 'doubly geographical' nature of comics, as they are produced in one socio-spatial context and evoke certain sentiments from the immediate audience which it was produced for, but can also be read and interpreted differently by audiences elsewhere. In 1995 alone, manga represented 40% of all printed publications sold, demonstrating the massive influence these comics have had and continue to have over Japanese society (Schodt, 1996: 19). Such figures are testimony to Schodt's statement that one cannot comprehend modern Japan without an understanding of the role manga plays in society (21).



#### 4.2 Jisatsu Circle 自殺サークル

Frederik Schodt (1996) writes that manga is 'more direct and personal' than anime, a statement abundantly clear in the opening pages of 'Jisatsu Circle', or 'Suicide Circle' (2002), a disturbing manga written by Furuya Usamaru (14). This manga is named after a cult formed by a schoolgirl named Mitsuko. The Jisatsu Circle cult activities include the worship and glorification of the act of suicide and self-harm. The story begins at the Shinjuku Train Station on the Chūō Railway Line, on May 31st 2001. On only the second page of Jisatsu Circle, temporal and spatial settings are specifically established. The Chūō Line is a significant spatiality, and instantly gives the comic a very specific and poignant geographic setting. This location is a famous suicide hotspot, dubbed the 'Suicide Train Line' in modern day Japan (Boylan, 2009). This temporal setting also corresponds to what Olivia Stevenson (2015) calls a 'geography of suicide', as in 2001, Japan's annual suicide rate reached 31,042, the 4th year in a row where rates exceeded 30,000 (Huus, 2013). With this deliberate contextual setting in mind, coupled with the name of the comic, the following graphic depiction of the mass suicide of 54 Japanese schools girls and members of Mitsuko's suicide club is almost anticipated. The explicit scene is described by radio broadcast, insensitively detailing and sensationalising the incident, seen in Figure 4.1. Despite the fictional nature of manga, the Japanese media's treatment of the mass suicide event and the spatial-temporal setting in Jisatsu Circle are factual, resembling real Japanese news stations' crass reports on suicide, as recorded by Bill Norris (2006), and also the popular locations where people commit suicide. Relating to my research questions, a clear geography of suicide is already identifiable in Jisatsu Circle.



**Figure 4.1 Chūō Line Suicide**

Graphic depiction of the mass suicide of the 'Jisatsu Circle' cult, as reported by a Japanese radio station.

Of the 54 girls who jumped in front of the train, one girl named Saya survived. Saya's survival was not by chance, as we soon discover that it became her duty to inherit the role of Mitsuko in creating a new suicide club and accumulating a new group of girls to collectively take their own lives in her name. Mitsuko, and now Saya, therefore represent what Qijin Cheng (2014) refers to as 'suicide contagion': an influential force in the formation of suicide clusters. Bizarrely, this scientific term was used in Jisatsu Circle by Mitsuko's old counsellor, as seen in Figure 4.2, making it abundantly clear that there is a real issue relating to suggestible youth and the formation of suicidal ideation in Japan. It is therefore justifiable to parallel Mitsuko and Saya's suicide club with the sensationalised nature of suicide reporting and the vast amount of suicide related media online in Japan, as studied by Lucy Biddle (2008), as both act as suicide catalysts in the fictional Japanese setting, within Jisatsu Circle and in everyday Japanese life. This example highlights the connection between visual graphic narratives and social realities highlighted by Jason Dittmer in his studies on the relationship between geopolitical realities and comics, a study which also relates to socio-spatial realities (2010).



**Figure 4.2 Media Contagion**

Takeuchi refers to the dangers of 'suicide contagion'.

Each time a new Jisatsu Circle club was created, the group increased in numbers.

Mitsuko's old counsellor, Takeuchi, attributed this to a rise in internet usage and this mirrored the escalation in internet suicide pacts or 'netto shinju' in Japan, described by Ai Ikunaga (2013) as a 'morbid new trend' in her qualitative analysis of online Japanese suicide bulletin boards (282). A fictional website called 'Ruins.com', seen in Figure 4.3, features frequently in Jisatsu Circle, where troubled school students go to fondly discuss Mitsuko and Saya, who are the embodiments of suicide and self-expression of misery. Ruins.com is evidently inspired by online suicide forums in Japan, outlets for discussions too distasteful for repressed Japanese individuals to openly talk about. Ruins.com acts as both a discussion board for suicidal individuals and a medium for gossiping and anonymous cyberbullying, which is a recent new dimension to what is already a social pandemic within Japanese schools (Salvaggio, 2013). This fictional website encapsulates all the dangers of unprecedented interconnectivity and 'techno-environmental change' in modern day Japan, studied from a sociological perspective by Lebra (1974). The name of this fictional website is ironically descriptive of the impact the internet can have on the moral values and lives of many vulnerable youths.

Returning to the aim of my research, Dittmer (2010a) highlights how identities and social roles are often carefully produced in fictional media by elites, as a form of 'social constructionism' (xviii). The author of *Jisatsu Circle*, Usamaru, is unconsciously contributing to Japanese stereotypes and normalising particular behaviours and societal ailments in his efforts to pinpoint issues in Japanese life. Despite the fictional nature of *Jisatsu Circle*, very real social concerns such as suicide are explored and further associated with certain spatialities, even virtual spaces such as Ruins.com. This website is an example of Stevenson's (2015) 'geographies of suicide', as online forums are a common virtual location in the 'suicidal journey' of many self-destructive Japanese people, and a recurring virtual spatial setting of suicidal characters in Japanese manga.

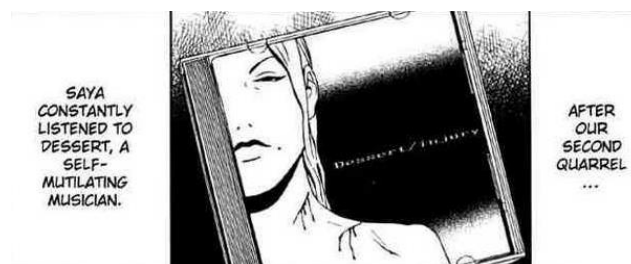


**Figure 4.3 Ruins.com**

'Ruins': a fictional website, demonstrating the role of the internet in allowing individuals to connect over suicide.

Another fictional form of media mentioned within *Jisatsu Circle* is a 'self-mutilating musician' named 'Dessert', a fabricated musician inspired by the Japanese 'Visual Kei' J-Rock music movement which became popular in the 1980s. The idiosyncratic Visual Kei movement focussed more on visual expression than music, and appealed to many unconventional youths. The most prominent pioneering band in the movement was 'X Japan' which lost its lead guitarist, Hideto Matsumoto, to suicide.

Hideto's death was sensationally reported on in explicit detail across news stations and over 50,000 mourning teenagers attended his funeral, with many attempting copy-cat suicide (Seno, 2006). The Visual Kei movement was a socio-spatial phenomenon specific to Japan, with a powerful influence over suicidal ideation in Japanese youth, reflected in Jisatsu Circle's depiction of Saya, a suicidal teenager and avid fan of the self-harming musician 'Dessert' pictured in Figure 4.4. Saya's best friend Kyoko feared her music taste was influencing her self-destructive behaviour, as seen in Figure 4.5. This cultural reference in Jisatsu Circle has a spatial significance within Japan, forming an emotional connection with Japanese readerships; a merit lost on Western readers who are mostly unaware of the cultural significance the Visual Kei movement held for many Japanese youth. As Miles Ogborn (2005) states in 'Mapping Words', a text can be interpreted differently in different places and meanings can be lost and re-imagined in new spatialities (Ogborn, 2005: 146). Jisatsu Circle contains many depictions of self-harm in disturbing detail. Considering how Jisatsu Circle explores the theme of media influence on suicidal behaviour in youths, the manga itself shows little consideration for those who may be vulnerable to the representations of suicide and self-harm, which is apparent in the abundance of graphic illustrations, seen in Figure 4.5.



**Figure 4.4 Dessert**

Fictional self-destructive musician with a large teenage following. Character inspired by Japanese musician Hideto Matsumoto.



**Figure 4.5 Self-Harm**

Saya pictured graphically self-harming, an incident which Kyoko correlated with her increased interest in the musician 'Dessert'.

Saya is a troubled individual, and many of the traumatic events she has had the misfortune of experiencing are a reality for people in Japan. Saya's father was a 'corporate warrior' but had a mental breakdown resulting from overwork, a common occurrence in Japan due to issues within the workplace and the unsustainable Japanese work ethic (Kawanishi, 2008). Experiencing financial difficulties, Saya turned to prostitution. Prostitution among Japanese school girls as young as 14 was considered to be at 'epidemic levels' in the late 1990s by Valerie Reitman (1996), and was still rife at the time *Jisatsu Circle* was published in 2002. The age of consent in Japan is 13, one of the lowest globally let alone in the developed world. Again, *Jisatsu Circle* represents spatially and temporally specific social phenomena, which most Japanese readers will have had some element of personal experience with. The sex industry and also the less promiscuous 'love industry' thrive in Japan, a country where work and capital accumulation is often prioritised over personal relationships. Money is frequently viewed as a means of alleviating the pain of what Smith (1997) describes as 'the emptiness and disorientation of the urban Japanese'

(160). As a result, some very unorthodox businesses have developed: 'cuddle cafes', 'rent-a-family facilities' and 'host and hostess clubs', where people pay large sums of money for basic human interaction. Saya's turn to prostitution reflects the desperate measures people go to for money in Japan, but also the unhealthy relationship between money and intimacy, and the apparent notion that money can buy happiness. 'Japan's contemporary social ills' are effectively conveyed in *Jisatsu Circle* (Silva, 2010: 400).

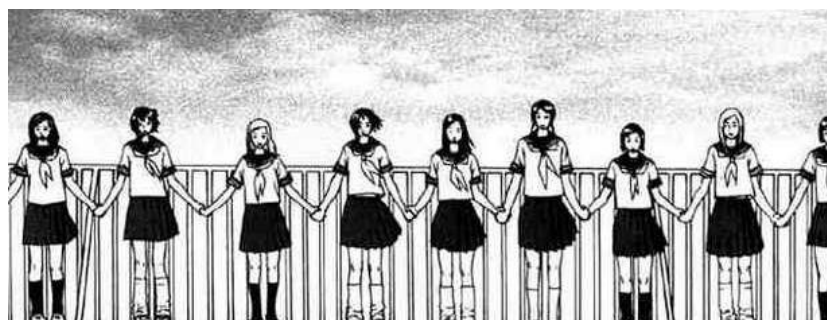
Saya's *Jisatsu Circle* was much larger than that of the late Mitsuko, and despite how Saya's best friend Kyoko had disapproved of the glorification of suicidal behaviour by the club, she too became infected by the 'suicide contagion' (*Jisatsu Circle*, 107). In the final chapter of *Jisatsu Circle*, the members of the suicide club are depicted as demons, as pictured in Figure 4.6, displaying a physical manifestation of this suicidal ideation. Media 'suicide contagion' is evidently a significant influence on suicide rates in *Jisatsu Circle*, but Durkheim (1897) highlights the significant effect spatial patterns in specific aspects of the social environment can have on the spatial patterns of suicide rates. In the case of Japan, spatially and temporally specific social maladies such as bullying, teenage prostitution, and internet suicide pacts have a blatant influence on the geographic location of the mass suicide of Saya's suicide club, from the top of the school building as seen in Figure 4.7. School is a 'battlefield' of 'savage competition' and a major trigger in suicidal behaviour in many youths, to the extent that many have developed a 'school phobia, a phenomenon referred to as 'tokokyohi' (Smith, 1997: 79-83; Yoneyama, 2000). The visual significance attached to Figure 4.7 is what Dittmer (2010b) considers a 'cinematic metaphor' in comics; the

uniformity of the school girls in their approach of death embodies the dangerous acceptance many Japanese people feel towards self-sacrifice (226). The fictional story of Jisatsu Circle reflects the pertinence of depictions of specific geographies of suicide (both real and virtual), in Japanese fictional media, and the influential nature of suicide in Japanese popular media and how it can result in copy-cat suicides, internet suicide pacts and 'cyberbullicide' among Japanese youth in particular (Luxton, 2012).



**Figure 4.6 Suicide Demons**

Manifestation of suicidal ideation in Saya's 'Jisatsu Circle', before the group's mass suicide.

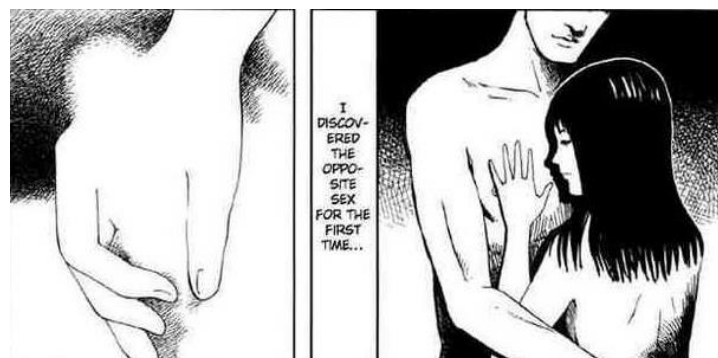


**Figure 4.7 Rooftop Suicide**

Mass suicide by jumping from a building.

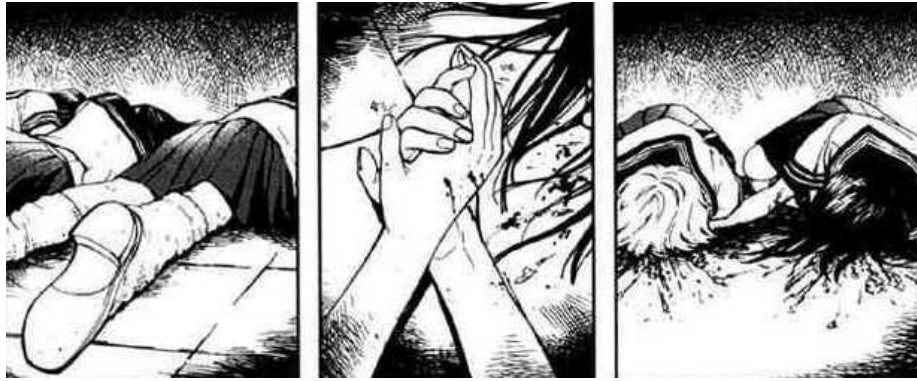


The dichotomy of censorship in Japanese media is starkly portrayed in *Jisatsu Circle*. Genitalia are strictly censored, or as seen in in Figure 4.8, the penis has simply not been illustrated at all. The implication is clear, without the graphic representation to back it up. However, detailed depictions of self-harm, suicide and abuse are presented unnecessarily and indiscriminately. 'Sexual repression' is a recognised Japanese phenomenon, explored by Daniel Eagles (2013), and is much of the reason why the aforementioned Japanese sex and love industries are so successful in Japan. Straying slightly from geographies of suicide and into geographies of sexuality, Japan has been described as an 'asexual site' by Millie Creighton (1998) in her analysis of Anne Allison's 'Permitted and Prohibited Desires' (1996); an analysis of Japanese sexuality represented in comics (Creighton, 1998: 459). Sexual repression is a spatially and temporally relevant issue in Japan, and Steven Stack (1996) highlights how excessive regulation and self-restraint can result in 'internalized aggression' and suicidal tendencies (134). Geographies of sexuality and geographies of suicide are linked in the unique case of Japan, as suicidal behaviour is a common symptom of sexual repression. The blatant censorship of the intimate 'visual narrative' seen below in Figure 4.8 reflects a geography of sexual repression in Japan (Dittmer, 2010b: 223).



**Figure 4.8 Censorship**  
Japanese censorship of genitalia in *Jisatsu Circle*.

Unlike depictions of sexuality, the Japanese are most certainly not repressed in relation to the expression of suicidal ideation, as suicide and self harm are constantly and sensationally illustrated throughout the Jisatsu Circle manga. These continuous and fleeting references to suicide without a doubt normalise the issue. The fact that sexual expression is still taboo in the 21st century in a developed nation is very damaging from a sociological perspective to the Japanese people, and this issue is only exacerbated by the acceptance of, and at times romanticisation of suicide in Japanese popular media, as seen in Figure 4.9 and Figure 4.10. These poignant images are some of the last in the Jisatsu Circle manga, and leave a lasting impression. Between the solidarity of the held hands and the first time we witness the smiling face of Saya, the suicide victims appear to be happy and at peace. This visual representation of Junko Kitanaka's (2009) 'suicide of resolve' is inappropriate and dangerous, but it reflects the spatially specific understanding of suicide, as a culturally sanctioned action in Japan. Jisatsu Circle is a unique manga, displaying many temporally and spatially specific societal ills within Japan, as well as an abundance of geographical links with suicidal ideation. It is important however, to be aware of the sensational and romantic depictions of self-sacrifice within the comic, and the possible influence this may have on vulnerable readers.



**Figure 4.9 Romanticisation of Suicide**

Suicide victims holding hands, romanticising self sacrifice.



**Figure 4.10 Smiling Saya**

The smiling face of Saya after she leapt from the roof of her school.

### 4.3 Paranoia Agent 妄想代理人

'Paranoia Agent' is a short Japanese anime television series created by Satoshi Kon, first aired in 2004. This series was highlighted by Chikako Ozawa-de Silva (2010) as an interesting example of popular media mirroring contemporary social ailments and the 'cultural and social psychological processes' of individuals in Japan (398). Susan Napier's 2005 analysis of anime in 'Anime: from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle' describes Japanese animation as 'the perfect medium' for displaying the issues of everyday industrialised Japanese life (12). The opening credits of Paranoia Agent are disturbing in their own right, presenting the main characters of the show laughing manically in a range of catastrophic situations: under the sea, plummeting through the sky, in a wreckage of demolished buildings, atop a pylon with a large mushroom cloud in the background, and perhaps the most unsettling scene of all is that of a young woman standing on top of a tall building and in the middle of rushing traffic, holding her shoes, which can be seen in Figure 4.11 below. The removal of one's shoes is a symbol of suicide in Japan, as it indicates the voluntary crossing of a threshold, whether it be the entrance of a home, a temple, or the afterlife.



**Figure 4.11: Tsukiko Sagi** Tsukiko Sagi, the main character in Paranoia Agent, holding her shoes in the middle of traffic.

Both the spatial environment and social cultural practices performed by the human subject in Figure 4.11 are Japan-specific, and contribute to what Roland Barthes (1989) coined as the 'reality effect'; a small detail which contributes nothing to the plot but creates a real atmosphere, which in this case reflects Japanese suicide rituals in a modern, capitalist urban Japanese setting. A blatant geography of suicide is presented, and this Japan-specific motif is made more sinister by the contrast between these distressing visuals and the show's jovial theme tune, almost making a mockery out of these disastrous scenes in Japanese life. The clear association with suicide in Figure 4.11 makes it reasonable to assume the other aforementioned ruinous scenes in the opening credits are a range of geographies of suicide. Each character in the show shares a common denominator; they have all become emotionally 'cornered' by the stresses of everyday life (MHZ, 2004). *Paranoia Agent* was written to explore the various societal ills spatially and temporally specific to contemporary Japan, and to demonstrate the need for actions to assist those in mental, financial and social distress.

The antagonist in the series is known as 'Little Slugger', an entity who assaults the vulnerable and depressed with a golden baseball bat. He becomes a media sensation and a symbol of fear among the Japanese general public. However, Little Slugger represents a beacon of hope for the hopeless in society wishing for an escape. Victims of Little Slugger include those in debt, victims of bullying and child abuse, those unable to cope with exam stress, individuals ostracised for their sexuality, and others experiencing relationship problems, homelessness, job loss, bankruptcy, work stress, mental illness, and involvement in prostitution. Little

Slugger does not always kill his victims, instead leaving them injured, and for some, in aftermath of the attack they experience an improvement in their lives. For example, Taeko Hirukawa was left with amnesia and no recollection of her father or his sexual abuse, and Yūichi Taira regained his popularity in school after being aggressively bullied following claims that he was Little Slugger. The assault validated his innocence, and he claimed that Little Slugger had set him 'free' (Double Lips, 2004). By the end of the series, we discover that Little Slugger is simply a manifestation of the self-destructive tendencies within the Japanese people; he is not real, and is simply imagined by those on the verge of a nervous breakdown and also a convenient scapegoat for those who commit suicide and fear the repercussions of their actions. The sensational treatment of Little Slugger in the media within *Paranoia Agent* mirrors the way Japanese media outlets deal with the topic of suicide; a perfect example of what Aitken and Zonn (1994) describe as fictional media and film creating a transparent 'window' on reality. Relating to my research aims, geographies of suicide are so embedded within Japanese media that 'Paranoia Agent' is exploring this relationship between suicide and media on a meta-level, seen in Figure 4.12.



**Figure 4.12: Suicide Saturation** News reporting and media infatuation with the Little Slugger attacks.

Little Slugger represents the power and influence of the media, as he grows from a small child in the first media report, into a huge monster as the media contagion spreads. Frequent scenes of people watching news reports, reading online articles and gossiping about Little Slugger are displayed throughout the series, and by end of the show it becomes apparent that 'paranoia nurtures him', just as paranoia nurtures suicidal thoughts (Radar Man, 2004). By the end of the series, 'Little Slugger' is synonymous with 'suicide' and he is described as a 'false salvation' (No Entry, 2004). Referring back to my research questions, the 'reel' and 'real' world are two dimensions in the geography of film, which are usually identified in fictional media from a critical perspective; however in *Paranoia Agent* a clear awareness of the disparity between the media portrayal of Little Slugger and the reality of what Little Slugger represents is evident. Again, a meta-level understanding of the negative influence media can have on suicide is reflected within Japanese fictional media, highlighting that the 'reel' is heavily influenced by the 'real', as seen in the case of fictional Japanese media production of spatially and temporally relevant issues in everyday Japanese life (Aitken & Dixon, 2006: 327).

A range of social maladies are normalised and presented as predetermined roles within Japanese society in *Paranoia Agent*. The very first episode of *Paranoia Agent* touches on the real-life increase in juvenile offenders in Japan. This is a spatially and temporally accurate reference, supported by Yuko Yamamiya's (2003) research on juvenile delinquency, which was published the year before *Paranoia Agent* was aired. This highlights the topical issues covered in manga. A news segment in *Paranoia Agent* blames the increase in juvenile offenders on the inability of youth to

distinguish the real world from the virtual world, an issue which may be the result of unprecedented technological advancements and their impact on human behaviour. The main character Tsukiko Sagi, is introduced as an overworked, under-slept, and depressed graphics designer, struggling to meet her work deadlines, pictured in the aforementioned Figure 4.11. In the second episode, the Japanese trend of intense psychological bullying, known as 'ijime' and cyber-bullying are prominent themes, which ultimately leads to the victim, Yūichi, retreating from society and trapping himself in his bedroom, a Japanese phenomenon called 'hikikomori', which often accompanies 'tokokyo', the refusal to go to school (Salvaggio, 2013: Saito, 1998: Yamamiya, 2003). Figure 4.13 depicts Yūichi's increasingly defaced school campaign poster, which is the product of a group of bullies' graffiti. As this projected façade of Yūichi grows, so does the degree of his alienation. Yūichi despairs how his classmates are being 'manipulated by the media', a theme central to my research.



**Figure 4.13: Ijime**

Yūichi's campaign poster, targeted and vandalised by school bullies.

Episode three hones in on the Yūichi's tutor, Harumi Chōno, a troubled young woman with Dissociative Identity Disorder, caught in continuous battle with her alternate personality Maria, a prostitute. Harumi is an introverted woman, whilst



her alternate personality is hedonistic, charismatic and confident. It could be assumed that Harumi's mental conflict was triggered by strict emotional repression, a possibility confirmed by a news presenter in *Paranoia Agent* openly speaking about Japan's 'repressed society' (The Golden Shoes, 2004). Repression is a prevalent behavioural trait in Japan, and a result of bushidō. In Yamamoto Tsunetomo's 'Hagakure', it is considered dishonourable to express both pride and modesty, and calmness is expected even in the most stressful of situations (Tsunetomo, 1906: 59-61). These traditional suppressive values are mirrored in modern society, as seen in the common Japanese phenomenon of 'sexual repression' (Daniel Eagles, 2013). Even when Harumi gets married, she refuses to tell her husband about her mental illness due to the stigmatisation of mental health problems in Japan, and instead chooses to die rather than reveal her secret and burden her husband, an altruistic mode of self sacrifice according to Durkheim (1897). *Paranoia Agent* acts as 'a mimetic of the real world', displaying the aforesaid Japanese social and cultural realities in a fictional setting (Cresswell & Dixon, 2002: 1). Harumi's husband is also her boss, an overworked and meagre man, who displayed no prior romantic interest in her before asking her hand in marriage. The spatial significance of his workplace proposal to Harumi epitomises the dominance of Japanese individuals' professional life over their personal life. Referring back to the geographies of suicide, we see a close relationship in the situations demonstrated in *Paranoia Agent* and real contemporary Japanese social ailments: overwork, bullying, and sexual repression. The spatialities of work and school demonstrated in these examples are still geographies of suicide despite the survival of the victims, as Stevenson (2015) notes

the importance of suicide survivors in the delineation of geographies of suicide, as it is the survivors who can communicate their 'suicidal journey'.

In episode nine, a young student is shown revising for his exams in a darkened and cramped bedroom, an example of the Japanese phenomena of 'exam hell' and also the aforementioned reclusive activity of 'hikikomori' (Kamiya, 2009). However, despite all his exam preparation, which heavily revolves around memorisation of arbitrary facts, as highlighted by Patrick Smith (1997), the student panics and runs to the bathroom, where we are presented with the visualisation of his knowledge literally being expelled from every orifice of his body, as seen in figure 4.14 below. The student has a mental breakdown and screams that he had memorised the work multiple times, before being attacked by Little Slugger which symbolises the act of his suicide in the show. The Japanese student commits suicide in school during his exam, after engaging in reclusive behaviour; an example which carries obvious geographic connotations and displays a clear 'suicidal journey' according to Stevenson (2015). Not only is the spatiality in which the character commits suicide poignant and directly related to the social pressures he faced, but a temporal significance is evident, as student suicide rates in Japan were at an all-time high when Paranoia Agent was first aired (The Japan Times, 2007).



**Figure 4.14: Exam Hell**

A student experiencing a nervous breakdown as the result of 'exam hell'.

In episode ten, the stressful nature of the Japanese workplace is illustrated, concentrating ironically on the anime production industry. This episode focuses on the story of the exhausted and nervous production coordinator, Saruta Naayuki, who experiences constant verbal and physical abuse in a very hostile work environment. His mistreatment by his co-workers fuels his incompetence at his job, which increases the work burden for his colleagues. By the end of this episode, every employee in the production office has died, either at the hands of Little Slugger, which represents suicide due to excessive work stress or by Saruta during his violent mental breakdown. Yuko Kawanishi's (2008) work on Japanese 'corporate warriors' committing 'karōjisatsu' or 'overwork suicide' is very relevant in this episode, as the suicides of Saruta's peers leading up to a work deadline, is a reality in many Japanese work environments. Tony McKenna's (2015) work on 'kaishaiism', or 'companyism' and 'shafu', or 'company spirit' is reflected in Saruta's behaviour after his mental breakdown, where he retains an unshaken dedication to his job and continues with his workload, despite all his colleagues being dead, repeating to himself that the future of the business is now in his hands alone (Paranoia Agent, episode ten).

Yuko Kawanishi (2008) reports how most work-related Japanese suicide notes include direct references to the companies they work for, apologising for being unable to complete their work on time. Individuals are evidently fettered to their workplace, an image powerfully portrayed in episode ten of *Paranoia Agent* by multiple scenes of dead employees sprawled across their unfinished work, which can be seen in Figure 4.15. Again, a clear geography of suicide is presented in this episode. Japanese workplace stress has resulted in many company buildings being re-imagined as spaces of suicide and *karōjisatsu*. Although *Paranoia Agent* highlights the issues in contemporary Japanese society which drive the high suicide rate, Aitken and Dixon (2006) highlight that many spaces can become 're-imagined through an engagement with film' (326). *Paranoia Agent*'s representations of suicide in the workplace may contribute to the normalisation of overwork, workplace bullying and self-sacrifice, as fictional representations of spaces are capable of transforming the meaning attached to real spaces (Aitken and Dixon, 2006: 327).

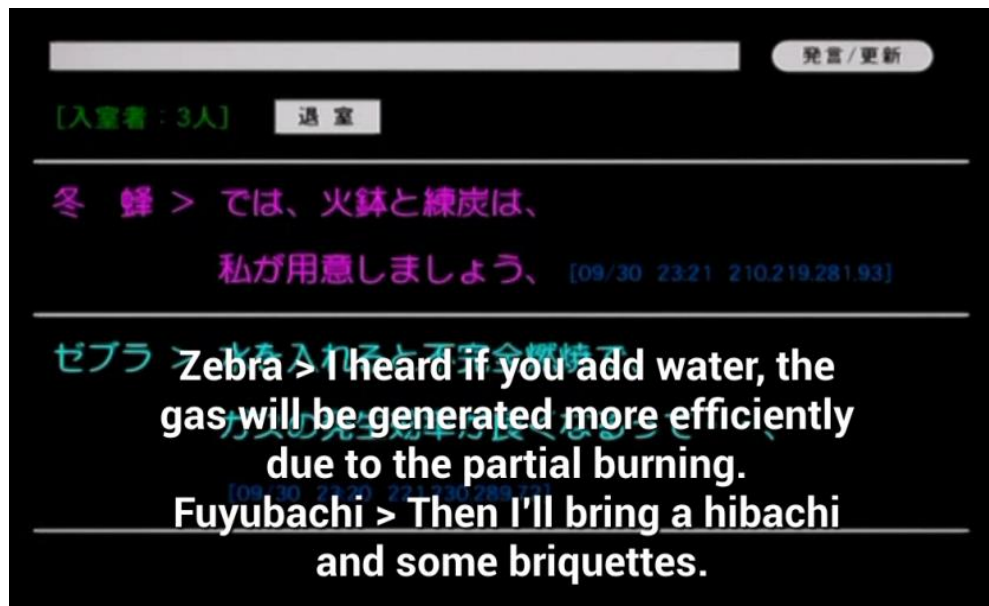


**Figure 4.15: Karōjisatsu**

An overworked employee, dead on his office desk surrounded by unfinished work.

The eighth episode of *Paranoia Agent* is unique, as it breaks away from the overarching storyline, revolving around Little Slugger. This episode is about a Japanese internet suicide pact, where three individuals have agreed to meet up and die together. Kamome, Fuyubachi, and Zebra represent a broad cross-section of Japan's suicidal population: a young girl under the age of ten years old, an old eccentric man, and a young gay man. This episode is named 'Happy Family Planning', a chafing reference to sexual contraception, the function of which is to prevent the creation of life. 'Family planning' in this particular episode of *Paranoia Agent* carries a very different meaning, and refers to the intentional destruction of pre-existing life. This is the only episode in the *Paranoia Agent* series which attempts to be humorous, despite being the most sinister episode of all. Japanese internet suicide pacts are referred to as 'netto shinjū', a phenomenon explored in detail by Ayumi Naito (2007). Internet suicide pacts occur in modern day Japan, among alienated individuals, often as a final attempt to become integrated within society (Durkheim, 1897). Throughout this episode, conversations between Kamome, Fuyubachi, and Zebra on internet suicide forums and chat rooms are displayed, casually discussing suicide methods and how to effectively execute each one. Internet suicide forums are virtual spaces of suicide, as previously discussed in relation to 'Ruins.com' in 'Jisatsu Circle'. In this virtual geography of suicide, seen in Figure 4.16, Zebra and Fuyubachi are discussing how to maximise carbon monoxide production through charcoal burning, a method of suicide which had become an 'epidemic' in Japan in 2003, the year before *Paranoia Agent* was first aired (Yoshioka 2014). This specific charcoal suicide epidemic is spatially and temporally unique to Japan, and is a clear example of fictional media and film 'mimicking reality' (Aitken &

Dixon, 2006: 327). The fact that a fictional television series was openly describing how to effectively commit suicide by charcoal burning, at a time when this method of suicide was rife in Japan is incredibly problematic and sensational, and could easily have contributed to the epidemic by influencing vulnerable youth.



**Figure 4.16: Suicide Forum**

The use of the internet in the formation of cyber-suicide pacts.

Japanese spirituality and what Carl Becker (1990) described as the 'manner of dying', are essential themes in this episode of Paranoia Agent. We discover at the end of this episode, that Kamome, Fuyubachi, and Zebra all died during their first suicide attempt; charcoal burning combined with drug overdose. However, because they spent their final living moments attempting to die so desperately, they have become confined to an afterlife of eternally chasing the perfect suicide and wondering why the Grim Reaper is 'too busy' to take them (Happy Family Planning, 2004). The three dead protagonists try to die by jumping in front of a passing train, but their attempt is foiled by a business man jumping to his death, right before their eyes. Train

suicide also featured in 'Jisatsu Circle', and is a stereotypical Japanese suicide method, to the extent that the Japanese government installed experimental suicide prevention techniques at train stations, such as blue LED lights (McKean, 2014).

Train suicide is deeply rooted in the geographies of suicide, firstly because many businessmen choose this location, due to the monotony of repeated work commutes, and secondly, more frustrated individuals choose this location as a suicide destination, due to the fact their family are required to pay disruption fines to the railway company. As a result, train stations can be thought of as very unique geographies of suicide, where resentful and angry members of society go to end their lives (Duignan, 2012). 'Cultural memory' becomes attributed to these locations through the repetition of suicidal behaviour (Roarty, 2012) In Figure 4.17 we see the spirit of the victim stagger away from the wreckage, covered in blood and under the impression that he too, had been unsuccessful in his attempt to die. He is unnoticed by everyone other than Kamome, Fuyubachi, and Zebra, all of whom do not realise that they are already dead. Kamome's childish excitement at the prospect of death, accompanied by the cheery soundtrack and an abundance of light-hearted jokes, distracts from the reality of this 'bleak picture' of Japanese society's attitude towards suicide, and risks normalising suicidal behaviour (Ozawa-de Silva, 2010). Suicide is presented as a banal annoyance in this episode of *Paranoia Agent*, rather than a permanent and severe end to life.



**Figure 4.17: Train Suicide**

The spirit of a suicide victim stumbling away from the train line where he had jumped to his death.

Kamome, Fuyubachi, and Zebra, still unaware of their death, contemplate other suicide methods. Kamome is extremely opposed to the idea of drowning, because her clothes would get wet, a statement which rouses laughter from her two new friends. The significance of the title 'Happy Family Planning' becomes clear, as the three individuals cheerfully bond over their mutual interest in suicide, with their afterlife consisting of schemes to achieve the ideal death. The three take a long train journey into the wilderness, where they plan to hang themselves peacefully and close to nature, as seen in Figure 4.18. This location is evocative of the suicide hotspot of Aokigahara Forest, described by Wataru Tsurumui (1993) as 'the perfect place to die'. Another geography of suicide is identifiable here; committing suicide surrounded by nature is peaceful and private, as opposed to the dramatic and traumatic statement of train suicide in Figure 4.17, described as 'messy' (Happy Family Planning, 2004). This suicide attempt fails due to the branch breaking, and the three are shown tumbling down a hill, whilst a jolly song plays. This scene



resembles the genre of 'slapstick' comedy, a seemingly inappropriate and offensive means of depicting suicide to many Western viewers, made even more nonsensical by Fuyubachi's panicked exclamation that they all almost died. Soon Fuyubachi realises that he, Zebra and Kamome are all dead, due to their lack of shadows, but instead of telling them, he simply continues his journey with his friends on their eternal mission to end their lives and the episode ends with the three literally skipping into the sunset. Afterlife is central to both Shinto and Buddhist faith, and even those who are nonreligious in Japan, mostly believe in the existence of an afterlife. This episode of *Paranoia Agent* is poignant, as the afterlife of these three likable characters is portrayed as one of enjoyment, with an integration into society that none of the three experienced when they were alive. Suicide is depicted as a fresh start for those who wish to escape their current life, a dangerous suggestion for vulnerable viewers of the show. Returning to the aim of my research, multiple geographies of suicide, sensational depictions of suicide, and temporally and spatially specific Japanese societal problems are evident in *Paranoia Agent*.



**Figure 4.18: Forest Suicide**

Zebra, Kamome and Fuyubachi in 'Happy Family Planning' attempting suicide by hanging.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Through the critical assessment of two famous pieces of popular Japanese cultural media: 'Jisatsu Circle' and 'Paranoia Agent', this research paper aims to highlight the understudied and significant role of fictional media and visual works in the field of geography. Japanese anime and manga function as a 'window' through which its readers can understand and experience both the quirks and the maladies of everyday contemporary Japanese life (Aitken & Dixon, 2006). Returning to the individual aims of this paper, concise conclusions can be drawn for each:

### 1) What specific geographies of suicide can be identified in Japanese fictional media?

Very clear geographies of suicide and 'suicidal journeys' are presented in both Jisatsu Circle and Paranoia Agent, demonstrating a clear socio-spatial connection between suicidal ideation and geographic setting (Stevenson, 2015). These geographies of suicide include specific geographic hotspots within Japan such as the Chūō Railway Line, but also more generic spatialities such as rooftops, derelict buildings, and secluded forests (most likely inspired by Aokigahara Forest). Geography of suicide focuses not only on the locations of completed suicide, but also on waypoints in the mental journeys of fictional individuals and the spatialities which provoked their suicidal ideation, which included virtual locales (online forums), school, and the workplace.

2) What spatially and temporally specific societal ailments contribute to a culture of suicide reflected in Japanese fictional media?

Through in-depth research on contemporary Japanese societal ills, the identification of these social maladies in a fictional modern Japanese setting is simple due to the clear 'mimeticism' of reality in fictional media (Aitken & Dixon, 2006, 327). At the time of publication of *Jisatsu Circle* and broadcast of *Paranoia Agent*, particular social issues in Japan were peaking in severity, such as charcoal suicides, 'hikikomori', teenage prostitution, and student suicides. All of these topical Japan-specific social ills featured in *Jisatsu Circle* and *Paranoia Agent*, proving the socio-spatial significance of suicidal behaviour, but also the insensitivity of Japanese media toward vulnerable individuals.

3) Does Japanese fictional media deal with suicide in a sensitive or sensationalist manner?

Frequent visual depictions and descriptions of self-harm and suicide are evident throughout the assessed fictional media, and in some cases these representations of suicide are heavily romanticised. Even the news reports relating to suicide within these fictional pieces of work are sensational, highlighting how embedded excessive media reporting on suicide is within Japanese society.

Unfortunately, due to the subjective nature of this research, the understudied relationship between fictional media and suicide rates, and the fact only two pieces of popular Japanese media have been analysed, this study raises more questions than it answers. Do sensational representations of suicide in fictional media

influence the Japanese to commit suicide? Have certain geographies of suicide in Japan developed purely through fictional representations of suicide in the media? Has the amount of suicide-related fictional media produced in Japan decreased along with the gradual drop in suicide rates? These are just a few examples of questions I hope to answer in future on this theme.

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