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Particularities of boys' manga in the early 21st century: How *NARUTO* differs from *DRAGON BALL*

ITÔ Gō

NARUTO is a ninja manga, and the apparent popularity of “ninja” in the west surprises us Japanese a lot. I would like to hear from you why ninja are so attractive to westerners. But let's turn to our subject. *NARUTO* is flourishing within the expressive space which was opened up by its precursor *DRAGON BALL*. Author Kishimoto Masashi has talked several times about *DRAGON BALL*'s influence on him and his respect for its creator Toriyama Akira. Similarities of the two works are, for example, the visual pleasure derived from depictions of untamed, three-dimensional body movements, as well as the fights which impress with martial-arts physicality. Yet, this is not limited to *NARUTO*. The expressive space of Japan's *shōnen* [boys'] manga, especially those serializations in the magazine *Shōnen JUMP*, extraordinarily drawn out due to endless chains and repetitions of bodies colliding with each other in fights—all of these can be traced

back to *DRAGON BALL*. The characters' fights are a matter of life and death. Every single one of them goes to the limit of their abilities, and readers empathize with them. *NARUTO*'s battles fascinate because of their surprising developments, which unfold when the combatants trick each other with the help of ninja techniques (*ninjutsu*, or *jutsu*) and cunning. A character might, for example, be about to fail, but then we learn, that apparently inferior movements were actually clever tactics, serving to generate an advantage over the enemy. In such moments, we as readers, are as much deceived as the characters.

NARUTO's ninja techniques are both magical and supernatural, but besides physical attacks which damage the rival's body, other jutsu are frequently employed as well, such as disguise, doppelganger, mental possession, hallucination and hypnosis. Especially the *bunshin no jutsu* (doppelganger technique), that is, splitting oneself up into many illusions of oneself, forms the basis of the ninja techniques in *NARUTO*. Protagonist Uzumaki Naruto goes to great trouble to acquire what translates as "Multiple Shadow Clone Technique", which later becomes his specialty.

Let's have a look at one of the battle scenes. At the so-called *chūnin exam* (which the characters take to achieve a higher ninja rank), Naruto meets Hyūga Neji.

Neji tries to find out who the real Naruto is among the dozen of his shadow



Fig. 1: *NARUTO*, vol. 12. pp. 20-21.



Fig. 2: *NARUTO*, vol. 12, pp. 21-23.

clones. Yet, his attacks make only clones disappear. Rationally thinking, he decides that the real must be the one who is fighting most defensively, the one with the lowest frequency of attacks.

But when turning the page, we see that Neji has been outwitted by Naruto and has attacked yet another shadow clone.

This is a very simple example, but it may demonstrate how the doppelganger jutsu itself is used as a tactic to lead the opponent astray initially, and then serves to confuse him more by second-guessing his next step. Further it is remarkable, that



Fig. 3: *NARUTO*, vol. 12, pp. 24-25.



Fig. 4: *NARUTO*, vol. 10, pp. 36-37, including the last panel of the previous page.

everything “visible” in this scene turns out to be an illusion generated by the rival ninja’s skill.

Anyhow, both characters and readers are fooled. Or more accurately, things are shown in a way that misleads the reader by means of page layout and panel arrangement. In the *NARUTO* world, fights almost always have this aspect of deception. Precisely therefore, the ninja-technique world of *NARUTO* may be determined as a space where the “visible” is not to be trusted. The visible is ever suspect, because it might be an illusion. Even when taking into account that the story contains elements such as the doppelganger, disguise and spirit possession, it is fair to say that among all visible things, the doppelganger is the most unreliable.

This lack of trust in the visible couldn’t be found in *DRAGON BALL*. For example, if we look at Naruto’s Shadow Clone Technique, it is not possible to tell on sight whether the Naruto we see is a clone or the original. And this applies to the readers, who do not live in his world, too. We should add though that the Shadow Clone Technique does not only create clones; among these clones the real thing is hidden. So, what can be trusted in Naruto’s world?

One of the things we can trust is something that makes intentional lies impossible. This device is the characters’ “voice of the heart”. In manga-studies terminology, it is called their “inner voice” (*naigo*). This inner voice can’t be perceived by the other characters. It is “invisible” to them. Only the readers, not contained in the work’s world, enjoy the privilege of seeing this inner voice exposed. One of the stylistic characteristics

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of the manga *NARUTO* is its frequent use of the inner voice; it is formally distinguished from spoken “dialogue”, mainly through differently shaped speech balloons.

In fig. 5, Gaara and Rock Lee fight against each other during the chūnin exam. The double spread shows the inner voices of four characters, in three different shapes (the subject determines the shape). Out of the following four shapes, which are generally used to express an “inner voice”, three are employed:

1. Words placed outside of a speech balloon.
2. Words inside a speech balloon that has a radial, or jagged outline.
3. Words inside a speech balloon with a foam-like tail (consisting of small bubbles)



Fig. 5: *NARUTO*, Shapes for Expressing the "Inner Voice".

diegetic world is not limited to Japanese manga. Yet, since the latter half of the 1960s, manga has seen a persistent evolution with respect to the use of the inner voice. Text placed on a manga page is read as an “inner voice” and gets linked to the characters. Usually, the reader easily understands instinctively whose heart is speaking through the link between script and character image.

The most simple way is to keep the text balloon near the character, within the same panel. It is also common to link text spread over several panels, to a character that appears in a different panel. For example, in fig. 5, we see that the text, placed over a total of five panels, is the “inner voice” of one and the same boy, namely Kankurō. The panels are stitched together through his gaze. The use of the “inner voices” makes it possible to efficiently explain certain things to the reader. This device is often employed in Japanese boys’ manga, especially sports manga. The frequent use of the “inner voice” in *NARUTO* is apparently motivated by the necessity to explain in a clever way what is going on in those complicated battles.

In *DRAGON BALL*, there is almost no use of the “inner voice”. In *NARUTO*, on

the other hand, it is obviously linked to the protagonists' self-reflection and to identity issues, in stark contrast to *DRAGON BALL*, where contemplations are almost absent.

In general, the "inner voice" is closely related to "confessions" about one's inner life. This kind of "inner voice" is also present in *NARUTO*, as the example in fig. 5 shows. The boy-ninja Rock Lee is soliloquizing about why everything is so frustrating. Here, the "inner voice" isn't a straight verbalization of his feelings, but rather an indicator of unexpected power. That is to say, the "inner voice" suggests the existence of an opaque part inside Rock Lee which he himself does not understand, and it indicates an emotion which lies so deep that it can't be penetrated by a verbalized "inner voice". Thus, Rock Lee's inner world is presented as something opaque and multi-layered. Interpreting this page as a depiction of a multi-layered inner world makes it also easy to interpret the gray-shaded panel which is separated from the inner voice and offers a visual of Lee's mental landscape. It depicts Lee himself, left behind by Naruto and Sasuke and unable to move forward. This landscape is visible to the reader and conveys a singular meaning, but it doesn't depict what Lee himself sees. Inner voices and mental landscapes can be seen by the reader, while remaining invisible to the characters. However, when measuring the "distance" to the consciousness of the diegetic actors, we may assume, that the "inner voice" layer is on top, and then, deeper, we find the layer of the mental landscape, with the latter being less visible to the characters than the former.

One of my students described *NARUTO*'s attraction like this: "its characters are pitiful". The Japanese word for pitiful, *ijirashii*, does not mean exactly the same as the negatively loaded "pathetic". It carries the nuance of feeling empathy, or a certain amount of pity and sympathy, for someone weak. *NARUTO* is about a group of characters, whose stories are told in separate episodes, and how these characters gain self-esteem is a recurring theme. It is a story about "recovering" from alienation. Estranged from their community and family, the characters achieve a consolidation of their identity through experiencing "bonds" with others. Naruto, for example, has been disliked and alienated by the people from his village because of the Nine-Tail Demon Fox spirit locked inside him. The story starts with the relationship between Naruto and his teacher Iruka, and offers variations of the same story for all main characters.

The recovery or consolidation of identity, mentioned above, should be read not as experiencing affiliation to community and family, but rather as overcoming negative feelings about oneself. And this includes to accept the good will and intimacy offered by one's peers. Or more accurately, to dissolve one's dismissal of such offerings. Just

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recall that Iruka liked Naruto, long before Naruto himself realized that. Or that the siblings Kankurō and Temari both love their brother Gāra.

NARUTO's whole narrative is eminently driven by the story of Sasuke running away, and Naruto chasing after him. Naruto's strong feelings for Sasuke are those of friendship and brotherhood. Let's call them "love" in the wider sense, that is, something higher than romantic love, like intense feelings for friends or family members. Sasuke's motivation for leaving the village was revenge on his elder brother Uchiha Itachi, and gaining the strength to achieve this goal. But he makes it clear, that for him this means to actively break off his bonds with his peers and the village Konohagakure. We can read Sasuke's behavior as an escape from the intimate community of his peers. It is caused by his refusal to accept the affection they offer him, and he more than anything resents creating an intimate relationship with Naruto. His mental state is especially well depicted in the long sequence in which Sasuke tries to kill Naruto. He does this at Itachi's urging, who said that by fulfilling the requirement to take the life of his best friend, he would be able to open the *Mangekyō sharingan* (a ninja technique unique to the Uchiha family). But Sasuke doesn't have the heart to kill Naruto. He ended up staring at the knocked-out Naruto for a very long time, and then leaves the site. Yet precisely the very attempt to kill Naruto, proves that Naruto is a very important friend to Sasuke.

The act of killing for a purpose is a negation of friendship and love. How can you call someone who is able to kill for a purpose your "best friend"? The message "Kill

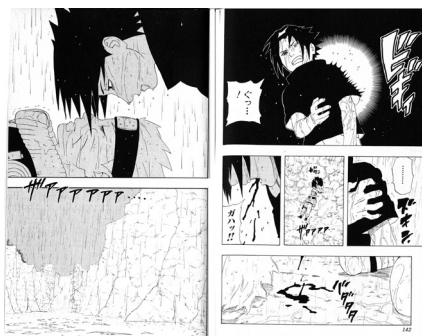


Fig. 7: *Naruto*, vol. 26, pp. 142-143.

your best friend!" is a double bind. It can best be regarded as a setting which depicts the mental state of denial. As such, it works very well. When faced with a choice, the killer can only follow his heart. Sasuke could not help but choose Naruto. By denying the existence of their friendship, he paradoxically admitted it, a literal denial. Sasuke couldn't kill Naruto because he couldn't reconcile himself with the method to obtain the Mangekyō Sharingan the

way his brother told him. But how does he really feel?

The readers know that the reason isn't what Sasuke thought it was. During their fight, a "mental landscape" emerges. Both are children, holding hands. Sasuke's denial is made without any awareness of what he is denying. Please recall what I said about



Fig. 8: *Naruto*, vol. 25, pp. 164-165.

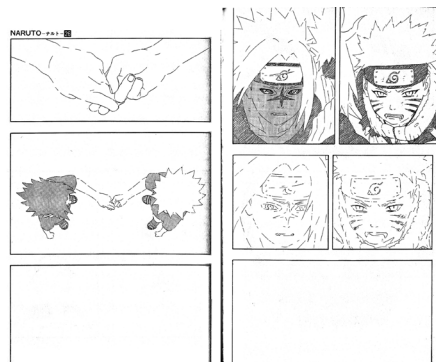


Fig. 9: *Naruto*, vol. 26, pp. 134-135.

inner worlds being opaque and multi-layered. Sasuke's "real intention" is not visible to himself. Even with an "inner voice", it is still possible to lie to oneself about one's real intention. But this level of denial is not possible in the mental landscape. What you can see the least is what you can trust the most. This principle is probably the pervasive spirit in *NARUTO*. And we can also assume, that Itachi's behavior after the assassination of the Uchiha family, which made Sasuke burn for revenge, was a result of his love for Sasuke, his younger brother. Itachi, too, deceived. But out of love.

The ninja village (*sato*) in *NARUTO* is different from a "country"; apparently without means of production, and partly belonging to something like a "country". In the time period of the narrative, a fragile power balance is upheld after a war between several villages. After the assassination of the Uchiha family, conflicts occur inside the "village". There are also the destructive schemes of a group of outlaw ninja, which don't belong to the "village", such as Orochimaru and the Akatsuki organization. We can regard these outlaws as the "evil" which has to be crushed, although they too were villagers once. So, their activities are also the subject of internal quarrels. Sasuke and Itachi are not evil either. The series will probably find its closure in Sasuke overcoming his denial.

Ninja are marginal people which can't be integrated into a nation state. They are a minority. As such they fight and obliterate each other in marginal places. We can regard this world view as a reflection of the world after 09/11.

To summarize, *NARUTO* is a manga, that in addition to endless fighting sequences, contains a series of "small narratives" about individuals who overcome their denial of the awareness that they are loved. As such, it is also a highly introspective work. This introspective theme was, from my point of view, made possible through

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the institutionalization of the “inner voice” in manga expression. It synchronized the parameters of post-*DRAGON BALL JUMP* manga, with the shape of the world after 09/11. Because of this, *NARUTO* has been able to enchant children all over the world.

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Biography:

Itō Gō, (born 1967), is Associate Professor at Tokyo Polytechnic University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Manga. He specializes in Manga criticism and Manga style. Publications: *TEZUKA is Dead, hirakareta manga hyōgenron e* [Tezuka is dead, postmodernist and modernist approaches to Japanese manga], Tokyo: NTT Publishing, 2005. *Manga wa kawaru* [Manga is changing], Tokyo: Aoshisha, 2007. *Manga o yomu, The Manga Reviews* [Reading manga, the manga reviews], Tokyo: Aoshisha, 2008.
email: jcb03060@nifty.com