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Pictotext and panels:
commonalities and differences in manga, comics and BD

NATSUME Fusanosuke
(trans. Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto)

Introduction

This paper is a rewrite based on a fifteen minute presentation at the 2009 International Comics Conference in Kyoto. [1] In that presentation, I focused on layout as an achievement of the modern medium of manga, giving several concrete examples. In regard to the intertwining of panels, images and words, I tried to demonstrate structural commonalities shared between BD and comics. In this paper I shall revise some of the arguments that were the original premise guiding my attempt. I have included my own approach toward the analysis of manga's expressive structure. In addition, I will touch upon an issue which we might have to discuss further, that is, how the panel arrangement is differently treated in Europe, the U.S., and Japan, according to the respective intellectual contexts.

1. Manga as modern media: the importance of the panel functions

Among the long and varied historic forms that combine image and script—ancient murals, religious pictures, traditional painting both occidental and oriental and so forth—reproduction-based mass media deserve our special attention, first of all those

1 Kyoto Seika University International Manga Research Center's First International Conference, "Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Scholarship on a Global Scale', December 18-20, 2009, Session 2: Border-crossing Comics Studies under the conditions of globalization, *On Elements of a Common Language for Communicating about Manga, BD and Comics*.

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which developed through newspapers and magazines. These media came into being thanks to such basic conditions as the development of industry, infrastructure and popular culture in the 19th-20th centuries. In this regard, Japanese manga, European BD, and American comics which evolved and influenced each other under the same societal conditions, are cultural phenomena with common ground in world history. Consequently, these forms of expression developed common qualities. One of these qualities is the narrative function of pictotext unfolding over a number of pages and panels and defined by the physical characteristics of print media (Takayama 2007).[2]

In the 1990s I attempted at deciphering the structure of manga expression by analyzing the relationship between its three basic components: images, words, and panels (Natsume 1992, Natsume and Takekuma, 1995). I thought that uncovering how these three components create a narrative through their interrelationship, would allow us to determine the distinctiveness of manga expression, as compared to cinema or literature.

What I regarded as especially important were the temporalizing functions that result from a continuum of pictotext units spreading over several stills, that is, non-filmic panels and pages. This form of expression differs not only from movies, but also from cartoons, which use a combination of pictotext in just one panel, from Japanese *kibyōshi* of the Edo period, which braid pictures into a textual tale (including partial break-ups of pages into panels),[3] and from Japanese picture scrolls of the 12th century in which a long tale is told through pictotext but without panels. Compared to those, modern manga articulates shorter time spans in panels through changes of scene and visual distance, evoking effects of temporal expression which are close to the grammar

2 In contrast to this rough treatment, it is possible to examine, for example, RodolpheTöpffer's *M. Vieux Bois*. In this work we find a kind of articulation of time reminiscent of modern panel functions, and it is also important to note that it was distributed through print and may have been the basis of contemporary BD. Its emergence was apparently backed up by a major transformation in European visual culture. But such research is still insufficient in Japan, and will have to wait for future studies. In this paper I treat manga, BD, and comics as shaped by widely popular media of reproduction, which have determined those similar media we use today. SeeTakayama for the transformation of Western-European visual culture in the 18th and 19th centuries.

3 A book format that was widely popular in Japan during the Edo period (1603-1868), based on woodblock printing. There is a lot of printed woodblock text on every page, with corresponding pictures. See Kane (2002) and Natsume (2004) for the relationship between this format and manga in Edo period.

of cinema. Cinematic storytelling as well as the storytelling by means of panels and pages in manga, BD, and comics developed during the 20th century probably while mutually influencing each other.[4] This interrelationship could rest upon the masses' accumulation of visual experience, including movies, and their increasing visual literacy.

Equally important to manga/comics' development as a mass entertainment everywhere, were its popular characters. Consecutive panels establish a character, which may exhibit various movements and facial expressions, as one and the same person in the reader's mind. Forming a unified image of a character which actually appears as a different picture in each panel, the reader grasps what happens to this character and its life. Moreover, depictions of environment and buildings that transform these events into a scene, as well as special symbols that indicate the emotions and mood of the characters,[5] make the reader experience a rich temporality, allowing them to enter the narrative universe. Panel layout, images and script create a compound that provokes a manga-specific temporality within the reader. Precisely this ensures the reader's immersion into the narrative.

However, the temporality we experience in the images themselves is different from the immediate synchronization of time as perceived through film; it is rather an imaginary temporality created by the brain of the reader which naturally temporalizes the space of images and lines as such. For example, the speedline accompanying a thrown ball is drawn as an imaginary line not visible in reality. The reader naturally picks up how fast the ball goes depending on whether this line is curved or straight. This differs from the temporality created by the panels as a continuum of the discontinuous, and it is also qualitatively different from the temporality initially inherent in text. When these different temporalities are synthesized and imagined by the reader as living beings and places, it is possible to achieve a presence no less than that achieved by the imaginary temporality of characters and narratives interwoven by

4 The role animated film fulfilled in influencing both printed cartoons and movies early in the history of cinema as an entertainment industry, seems important.

5 For example, the smoke and lines that represent explosions, sweat that expresses impatience, groups of broken lines that represent a budding awareness. These are covered in *Manga no yomikata* '(Natsume and Takekuma, 1995), and called *keiyu* (shape metaphor).

cinematic sequences.

In a sense, to achieve a kind of storytelling similar to that of cinema and novels in manga, BD, and comics, it is necessary to control and synthesize the units of pictotext that panels are made of. In his book *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen writes about this function: "The strip, the page, the double page, and the album are nested multiframes, systems of increasingly inclusive proliferation." (Ibid: 148). Groensteen's generative system of narration, in which individual panels can be contextually read as spaciotemporal references, accurately grasps the importance of the function of pages and panels, common to manga, BD, and comics.

2. An analysis of panel functions using concrete examples

2. 1. The articulation of time in panels, and the momentaneity of the page

Fig. 1 is from Tezuka Osamu's *Hi no tori: Uchūhen* [Phoenix: Universe], [6] a scene in which, after an accident in the far reaches of space, each crew member is adrift in a small personal escape pod. Being frozen during their trip, one by one has to pilot the ship for a while, but when during an emergency all crew members are thawed, they realize that the pilot in charge has turned into a mummy. From inside their drifting escape pods, the crew members, accompanied by the very man who is now a mummy, discuss this mystery. The crew are pictured lying in their capsules, with only their faces and speech appearing in small panels strewn across the page, while a panoramatic image of the capsules drifting through space stretches over the same spread. At the start of *Hi no tori: Uchūhen* there are over thirty pages of this flashback scene in which space and humans are represented through the juxtaposition of small and large panels.

Following the 'reading' direction of manga, the reader pursues the story moving their gaze from right to left. The small panels lined up vertically on the right are literally embraced by the larger panel of cosmic space, and connected by the gutter[7] between the panels, drawn in the shape of tubes. Connecting the cosmic space and

6 During the presentation at the symposium I used an example by Ōtomo Katsuhiro, but because it is colored it is hard to see in black and white printing, so I have chosen a work by Tezuka instead.

7 In *Manga no yomikata* (Natsume and Takekuma 1995) the spaces between panels are referred to as *mahaku* (gutter, hiatus).

Fig. 1: Tezuka Osamu Hi no tori 9 – uchūhen, seimeihen (1992) Kadokawa Publishing, (first published in 1969), p. 62.

the capsules results in a kind of simultaneity between the enormous space and distant time on the one hand and the petty human conversation, which it encompasses, on the other. The page is structured in a way as to suggest watching the panels simultaneously and thereby experience the loneliness of a mere human adrift in the vastness of space.

The closing in on individual dialogue as well as the flashbacks invite a strong feeling of empathy for the characters; however, this empathy is immediately swallowed up by the enormity of cosmic space and time, and makes the reader too feel strangely adrift. Important here is the momentaneity of a number of panels that cause a multi-layered reception of the infinite space and the characters as located both in the same temporality and apart at the same time. This momentaneity is amplified as a double spread in fig. 2, where a vast blank space emphasizes the difference between the enormity of space and the pettiness of the individual characters even more. The act of following the panels and turning the pages turns into a time of mystery reading, which makes the reader get absorbed by the story.

This kind of expression which fosters the coexistence of articulated time and

momentaneity, has been refined by turning the limitations of the printed page into advantage, and as such, it has seen a development entirely different from other media like cinema and novels. Moreover, the comparative expression of large-scale spatiotemporalities as in the above example needs more than one page, that is, narratives of a certain length, and it only works effectively in stories of a certain complexity.[8]

2.2. Panel-based identity codes for characters, and their reversal

Manga guarantees the identity of characters by drawing them with the same characteristics in different pictures distributed over several panels, and it evokes the

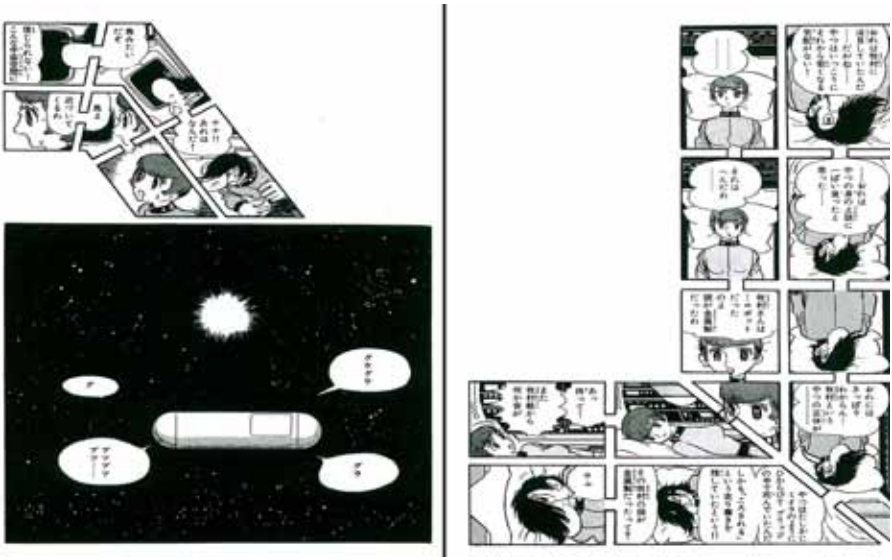

Fig. 2: Ibid.: 76--77.

impression of these characters' movement in time. Dialogue creates a time of spoken meaning and is an important narrative thread helping characters retain their identity even when drawn over several panels intermittently. It goes without saying that this identity is guaranteed by the linked continuum of panels and pages.

8 These drifting parts were published in the monthly magazine *COM* between March and May of 1969. Expressions like this, which use plenty pages and panels as well as a lot of blank space, became possible within long-running Japanese-style manga series, because these series developed in the format of mainly monochrome, cheap, and tome-like manga magazines.

However, a character as a picture in a panel is, in a way, just a bunch of drawn lines which exist only in that panel. Acknowledging this character to be identical with characters in other panels is possible because we find (if only partially) the same markers in different pictures, and lean on the narrative context even if the character looks apparently different. In other words, identification depends on a contextual 'reading' in line with manga-specific conventions.

This contextual reading occurs within the imaginary time of the reader, which is consecutively framed by panels and pages; over and over again, it lets the reader perceive the individual panel as a manifestation of one specific time-space within the same scene, the same drama, the same narrative. Thus, a character drawn in one panel will at the same time always contain characters of a different time and space, which brings a kind of contradiction into play. In his book *Manga genron*, Yomota Inuhiko addressed this contradiction in relation to manga faces:

"The same face is never drawn twice.

But the same face can be drawn over and over again." (1994: 186) The former applies to the stage prior to codification, while the latter prevails once the character has been integrated into a personality and codified. Precisely because this code is strictly adhered to, manga allows for a variety of disguises and "ninja clone techniques" (*bunshinjutsu*),[9] Yomota puts it.

Fig. 3 is from Fukuyama Yōji's *SCHIZOPHRENIA*, published for an overseas audience with a left to right reading direction. It shows the chaos that ensues when a character who invented a time machine comes to the same space and time from several different times.

This work subverts the manga code of character identity by surprisingly placing characters that should be in different panels within the same panel. The paradox created by the time machine idea—the same character inhabiting the same time-

9 Ninja comics from the 1950s such as those by Shirato Sanpei, which Yomota also discusses, started featuring scenes in which the face of the same character would appear multiple times in the same scene, as *bunshinjutsu*, the art of splitting oneself up. One way to do this is through very fast movement, using the art of lingering vision; then the same character appears in one panel multiple times. Another way is to use a different person in disguise, who can appear in the same panel or in different panels, and thus deviate from the rationality of the narrative, depicting a 'mystery'.

space—becomes a nonsensical violation of the manga-specific code that guarantees the character's identity. Up to a certain degree, the reader empathizes with the character, but because the same object is depicted repeatedly in the same panel, the impression is one of odd schism and integration. On the next page of this work (fig. 4), the same characters are overlapping in a group. The codes of identity and difference are mixed up even more, shaking the reader's sense of integration. This play with codes and their violation reveals the polyphonic structure potentially inherent in manga expression,

Fig. 3: Fukuyama Yōji (1983) "SCHIZOPHRENIA", in: *MANGA, Tokyo*: METRO SCOPE Co.Ltd, p. 73.

Fig. 4: Ibid.: 75.

while arousing a very contemporary and probably neurotic kind of 'laughter'.

The same character that is drawn multiple times here pushes his picture which is supposed to spread over several panels, into the momentaneity of one single frame, drawing upon a reversal of the pictorial plurality characteristic of manga panels. Such an expression folds the code of contextual manga 'reading' back into one panel. By means of this deviation, the unique narrative code resting on pages and panels has achieved an extremely manga-like aesthetic.

2.3. Image and word integrated by panels: The gaze system

Fig. 5 is a double page-spread from Kawaguchi Kaiji's action manga *Chinmoku no kantai* (The Silent Service), featuring a submarine. On the right page, impact lines and sound words depicting an explosion, the effected submarine, and close-ups of the crew inside are alternately drawn. Taking up a large portion of the top tier of the page are the scenery and the situation including the characters, while the impact on the characters inside the ship is presented as a strip of small panels. The top two panels give the

impression of heavily squashing the lower three panels, making the situation enclose the characters. Because of the panel arrangement of this page, the reader experiences an oppressive, claustrophobic space, being confirmed of the situation through the words on the right page, where a character in the last panel shouts, "A torpedo exploded at a distance of 100 meters!"

This dialogue line is connected to the shouted order inside the ship on the left page, "Don't let the ship go off balance!" In this double spread the reader can't see the commander. However, because on the left page his order overlaps with the ship going off balance due to the explosion, the reader unconsciously feels as if the order came from the submarine itself. The submarine, including its crew, seems to attain a collective personality. Indeed, in this series, submarines and battle ships look as if they had personalities, as if they embodied the will of the crew and in particular the captain. This device is a manga trick to create the illusion of being right in the middle of a battle

Fig. 5: Kawaguchi Kaiji (1998, first published from 1988-96): *Chinmoku no kantai,* Tokyo: Kōdansha Paperback Vol. 5, pp. 420-21.

between humans rather than an underwater combat with submarines at its center.

The sense of oppression felt in the panels with characters at the bottom of the

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right page suddenly changes into a feeling of liberation that spreads out over the entire left page. This is one of the pleasures which entertaining action manga provide for their readers. If we assume that the panel break-up is equivalent to a cut back in film, the same should be possible in film. But the momentaneity of being able to see at one glance the break-up and layout of differently sized panels on one double spread creates a different effect. In this scene, the continuity of dialogue on the right and left pages interconnects subjects different in nature, that is, humans and the submarine, resulting in the perception of the submarine as an anthropomorphized being. In a sense the identity code of characters extends to the submarine here.

Humans have a strong tendency to focus on humans, particularly their faces, when examining moving or still images. They will look at the eyes and the mouth, at hands and then feet.[10] Likewise, manga has formed a unique code of gaze movement by combining body parts that are drawn prominently, and script (dialogue, narration, monologue and onomatopoeia) which attracts attention immediately after a character's physique, with pictorial compositions. The sometimes efficient, sometimes ambivalent moves of the reader's gaze are determined by the 'reading' direction of the spread, linking and structuring diverse visual elements like script and images (and sometimes blank spaces).

In this way consecutive panels and pages become a system that consolidates the movement of the gaze. The gaze connects diverse things such as persons and submarines with various levels of language, produces differentials between events, and works them into the time of the large narration. The time of narration inside the reader attaches new meanings to single images and words every time, contributing to the complex fabric of imagination.

This is how the panel-ruled interaction of images and words gives rise to manga-specific storytelling. This narrative function, as demonstrated with the help of the above examples, is essentially shared with BD and comics. When discussing these phenomena in an international forum, the particular forms of expression provide us with a multitude of common denominators.

10 See Solso (1997).

3. Differences between manga, BD, and comics

As for the differences between manga, BD, and comics, we can easily give examples. There is the medium of appearance, the size of the market, and—putting diversity aside for the moment—also forms of expression. There is the difference in reading direction: East Asian manga, for example in Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, are read from right to left and contain mainly vertical script, whereas BD and comics are characterized above all by the opposite direction and horizontal lines of text. Another subtle difference, perhaps brought on by the previous element, can be found in panel arrangement and gaze movement. There is also the different amount of pages in book editions, the difference between mainly monochrome manga and richly colored BD and comics, and so on. These are issues that will probably be explored further.

However, what seems most important here are the different critical and analytical languages developed in each region, under respective historical conditions and in specific discursive spaces.

For example, in Japan, the peculiar field of manga targeted at women—shōjo manga by women for mostly female readers—has become highly significant since the postwar period. Particularly since the seventies, unique expressions initially absent from male-oriented manga have been held in high regard and greatly influenced manga of other genres.

Speaking from my own limited knowledge, there was a field of girls' comics in America too, and there were also French BD for girls. But both genres were dominated by male artists, and declined anyway in the 1950s and 1960s. Female manga, on the other hand, have been centered on female authors and readers, which seems to be unique from a global perspective. Due to these historic conditions, there are still many women authors active in Japan, who can rely on a large readership.

In Japan, the post-war baby boomers are also named the 'manga generation', and for some of them, the preferred critical object of the 1970s was shōjo manga, which they regarded as the future of manga's expressive potential. Ever since, shōjo manga has held an important and unique position in critical discourse. Also, many women who grew up reading shōjo manga claim that the genre had a major impact on their lives[11].

11 A representative work is Fujimoto's *Watashi no ibasho wa doko ni aru? Shōjo manga*

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Fig. 6 shows an example of shōjo manga, taken from Iwadate Mariko's 1986 series *Tōi hoshi o kazoete* [Count the distant stars]. It exhibits a bold use of blank space, which can probably be traced back to manga's favoritization of monochrome renderings. The panels are laid out diagonally, without borders, overlapping each other. While panel arrangement in general is a configuration of closed panels, this standard has been loosened here. The characters which seem to float within a blank space void of any background, and the text free from balloons create a unique feeling of hovering. In tune with the characters' disconsolate mood, the panels' function of articulating time is suppressed here, and the blank background robs the scene if realism. In contrast with the very dense impression of *Chinmoku no kantai* in fig. 5, this expression dodges being read, rather inviting the gaze to just wander around. In spite of the simplicity of the picture, the reader becomes engrossed in the depth of this scene.

Integration through panel arrangement is a basic standard in manga, and a system that guarantees the narration's temporality. But in many shōjo manga the panel borders are frequently violated by blank space, characters, and script, making the picture look multi-layered. This layered structure of panels in shōjo manga, which I analyzed in the collective volume *Manga no yomikata* (1995), has been critically elaborated upon by Itō Gō in his book *Tezuka is dead* (2005). Itō posits that in manga it is actually impossible to say whether the reader's visual frame is formed by the page or the panel (he calls this 'the uncertainty, or indeterminability of the frame'), and that precisely this makes manga expression unique. Male-oriented manga leaned on cinematic techniques, and developed a style in which panels were supposed to play the role of the cinematic screen. Shōjo manga on the other hand pursued a strategy which Itō describes as follows: "Unlike *gekiga* and *seinen manga* [manga for male youth], shōjo manga didn't suppress the characteristic that is manga-specific in the truest sense of the word, namely the uncertainty of the frame." (Itō 2005: 228).[12]

I do not intend to discuss the validity of this quotation here. It should however be

gautsusukokoro no katachi (1998).

12 The *gekiga* (lit.: dramatic pictures, or pictorial dramas) in the quotation appeared during the juvenilization of Japanese manga, between the fifties and the seventies, it is a name for an expressive trend that demanded more realistic and excessive depictions. I sometimes called BD and comics by this name (when talking in Japanese), but this may cause confusion over terminology here.

Fig. 6: Iwadate Mariko (1987): *Tōi hoshi o kazoete*, Tokyo: Shūeisha, pp. 78-79.

noted that this argument is widely shared in Japanese manga studies. But what happens when this framework born out of a specific discursive space, meets BD and comics theory, which do not have a peculiar area such as shōjo manga?

When Thierry Groensteen, who came to Japan in winter of 2009, was asked by Itō about the uniqueness of shōjo manga at a symposium organized by Meiji University,[13] he didn't acknowledge it as a unique system of expression. The alleged uniqueness seemed to him as sufficiently integral into his BD theory. Given the discursive space he comes from, this was perhaps a natural response. He promised to analyze shōjo manga in the near future though (and thus raised high expectations). Here we find the differences in historical conditions and discursive space of which critical analytical language is a part.

Odagiri Hiroshi, who is an expert in American comics, points out (for example

13 Meiji University School of Global Japanese Studies, Special Symposium: "The grammar of visual culture and comics - Welcoming Thierry Groensteen", sponsored by The Japan Foundation, December 23, 2009.

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in this anthology) that it is dangerous for Japanese manga criticism to treat manga as if it developed solely within Japan, and to insist on manga's stylistic uniqueness without even looking at foreign examples. In his book *Sensō wa ika ni 'manga' o kaeru ka* he writes:

> Japanese manga criticism often finds the uniqueness of Japanese manga in the diverse monologues and introspective depictions which are representative of shōjo manga, but in American superhero comics, monologues are not exceptional either. Japanese manga researchers should at least know that American comics have a history of their own with respect to techniques for introspective depictions, such as monologues and panel layout. (Odagiri 2007: 233-234)

Whether shōjo manga is a globally unique form of expression, and unique to what extent, has not yet been subject to thorough comparative investigation. Yet, given this point alone, it is necessary that we relativize the history and discursive spaces we are part of, and try to alter our perspectives. We should exchange knowledge, and after careful deliberation, question whether our respective discourses still stand.

An awareness of differences, as outlined above, is necessary, when we want to engage in international debate about manga, BD, and comics, and face the task of how to bring together our respective languages. While we have things in common, we also differ. To what extent we can become aware of this self-evident fact and turn it into an opportunity for discussion is what we should be asking ourselves next.

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