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## The Eye of the Image: Transcultural characteristics and intermediality in Urasawa Naoki's transcultural narrative *20th Century Boys*

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“20th century toy, I wanna be your boy”  
(T.Rex “20th Century Boys”, 1973)

### 1. Introduction

Urasawa Naoki's manga *20th Century Boys* is a graphic narrative of global validity, thanks to its multilayering of musical references, iconic images and several timelines. This manga compresses a variety of images in a special manner, thus achieving a

pictorialism, that contributes to the conception of *20th Century Boys* as a *pictorial encyclopedia*<sup>1</sup> for the second half of the past century. The symbols of eye and hand, which the protagonist Kenji and his friends chose as a logo in their childhood, suggests Urasawa's work should be read as a visual form of *Sehtheorie* [theory of viewing], in which the various images and motifs are compressed into a common allegorical significance that goes beyond the plot depicted in *20th Century Boys*. Urasawa tells his story of a few boys from the 20th century by constantly recursing to images from the late period of this time. In particular, from mass communication media from radio and television to contemporary computer media, both fundamental to the dissemination of knowledge and essential for the understanding of the structures in Urasawa's manga. Therefore this paper is a first attempt at an interdisciplinary reading of Urasawa's manga that combines the visual knowledge of art history with the narratological competence of literary theory and extends the media studies perspective on accessing manga. We have chosen this manga, since it is a prominent example for analyzing intermedia and transcultural phenomena which in particular disclose the need of historical visual knowledge as a basis for comics studies.

In *20th Century Boys* Urasawa Naoki draws on a multitude of visual metaphors taken from the pool of media-based images of the last 50 years. This paper aims at retracing how Urasawa establishes a transcultural narrative for the new millennium that is rooted on the verge of the 21st century but recounts the past half century and aims for the future. One prominent example is Okamoto Taro's *Tower of the Sun* (1970), which appears repeatedly in the manga series and reveals the summoning of traditional concepts by Urasawa what is also a typical strategy of contemporary Japanese art (Vartanian and Wada 2011). The *Tower of the Sun* by Okamoto Taro<sup>2</sup>, for example, is based on late Jomon period earthenware (ibid.: 157). By giving this monument of the *EXPO '70* a crucial role in the plot of his narrative Urasawa pays credit to Okamoto's anthropological concept, whenever he reflects on a certain culture in his manga. Also by doing so he provides a reading support for his multi-timed plot since the "head, abdomen, and back [of the tower; FG & JM] all have a face formation, representing the future, the present, and the past in turn." (ibid.) In Urasawa past, present, and future are heavily interwoven and connected with memorabilia from

1 Not to be forgotten in this context, is the immense importance of collecting and archiving images to generate a common cultural memory (eg. Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne-project). In addition to older visual media such as photography and film, now especially the internet and computers serve as digital data storage of a global culture of memory.

2 This paper refrains from using macrons to indicate long Japanese vowels in order to avoid mistakes.

each period making time and memory the key topoi of *20th Century Boys*.

By expanding his grasp on not only Japanese traditions but also onto western popular media products (in the broadest sense) Urasawa corresponds with the tradition of Japanese modernization; he fuses the traditional and the local with the global, among other things, the idea of collecting, saving, and archiving of objects as an art form<sup>3</sup>. The latter can be found widely throughout popular culture, referring back to the classical idea of an encyclopaedia:

Collecting and generating are, in this sense, related cultural techniques: Generating is a collective activity in an already available area of culture, pre- and extra-literary perhaps, but actually in the form of a parent stock of knowledge or [...] in the form of an encyclopaedia<sup>4 5</sup> (Baßler 2002: 96).

By collecting ideas from the pictorial inventory of the late 20th century and generating new images from a personal point of view, Urasawa gives way to a transcultural flow of memory images and creates a graphic narrative that has global validity.

## 2. On the artist and his manga *20th Century Boys*

Urasawa Naoki, born in 1960 in Tokyo, is one of the most recognized mangaka of his generation. Outside of Japan, Urasawa is mainly renowned for his series “Monster” (originally serialized in *Big Comic Original*, 1994–2000), “20th Century Boys” (originally serialized in *Big Comic Spirits*, 1999–2006), and most recently “Pluto” (originally serialized in *Big Comic Original*, 2003–2009), all of which have also been published in the United States, France, Spain, and Germany. In 2004, Urasawa received an award at the French *Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d’Angoulême* for *20th Century Boys*, and in 2006, the series was nominated for the *Max and Moritz Award* at the *International Comic Salon* in Erlangen, Germany. While all 22 volumes of the series and also the two issues of the follow-up *21st Century Boys* have been published in Germany, the American publisher *VIZ Media* has only

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3 For more details see Schaffner (1997).

4 For the idea of comics as an encyclopaedia of knowledge see Meinrenken (2007, internet; 2011/forthcoming).

5 Translated from German: „Sammeln und Generieren sind, so gesehen, verwandte Kulturtechniken: Generieren ist eine Sammeltätigkeit in einem Bereich der Kultur, über den man bereits verfügt—vor- und außerliterarisch zwar, aber durchaus schon in Form eines geordneten Wissensvorrates oder [...] in Form einer Enzyklopädie“.

published fifteen issues so far<sup>6</sup>.

Starting in 1969 and ending in 2017, the fate of a group of childhood friends around the protagonist Kenji is related<sup>7</sup>. However, the story is not told chronologically, but starts in 1999, on the verge of New Year's Eve 2000, and continues after a long break in 2014. In particular, childhood memories of the late 1960s and the 1970s are reported, without exception through extensive flashbacks. In 1969, the young Kenji and some of his friends form a 'gang' and set up secret headquarters<sup>8</sup>. Inspired by manga and Science Fiction films of their time, they develop their own doomsday scenario in which they position themselves as heroes and saviors of the fate of all mankind. With the beginning of the action around the year 2000, the once childish fantasies of omnipotence really start to happen and plunge parts of the world into chaos. These events are concerted by the so-called *friend*, an unknown but seemingly all-powerful cult leader who apparently had access to the ideas of the once-children. Kenji now gathers his former friends in order to prevent the impending apocalypse.

### 3. The layer of reference to musical and visual media

As indicated by the number of awards, this series counts as Urasawa's most renowned work nationally and internationally. This global recognition—so we claim—can be traced back to both this manga's narrative and visual particularities. *20th Century Boys* creates a retrospective of the 20th century via patent references to modern media and devises a dark vision of the future. Besides movies, computer games, and comics, it is American and British rock music of the 1960s and 1970s that plays a crucial role. The series' title is borrowed from the song *20th Century Boy* by the British glam rock band T.Rex. The chorus "20th century toy, I wanna be your boy" and the line "Friends say it's fine, friends say it's good" has a multi-layered echo both

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6 Vol. 16 is scheduled for August 2011.

7 The idea of a group of adolescents whose personalities and especially whose personal memories as such are viewed as time capsules in a fictional narrative can be found in the collection *Time Capsule: short stories about teenagers throughout the twentieth century* (1999) by Donald R. Gallo. Here also—just as in *20th Century Boys*—is the personal fate of each character interwoven with political and technical advances of each period of time.

8 This secret headquarter is located in a deserted field surrounded by forest. One could argue that this location resembles the *utaki* [a sacred place] that Okamoto Taro describes in his works about his field studies in the 1960s and 1970s in Japan. Okamoto was convinced "that here in the 'utaki' was something that had been passed down since time immemorial, a supernatural presence that descended upon an empty plot of land" (Ito 2005: 21). For Kenji and his 'gang' their old secret headquarter evolves into an *utaki* whose 'supernatural presence' interconnects all timelines of the plot and functions as an anchor for the whole plot scheme.

at the story level and at the visual level. Playfully, and musically inspired, Urasawa composes a relation between childhood, adulthood, and friendship and confronts these with the destructive identity of the 20th century. Urasawa's fictitious cultural and historical construction sets in with the wild musical energy of Rock'n'Roll, which even serves as the series' overture: When the song *20th Century Boy* reverberates through the hallways of a junior high school in 1973, it provides a hint to Kenji's future. He is the 20th century boy and together with his friends he has to save mankind for the new millennium (*20th Century Boys*, Vol. 1: 10f.). But the use of a simple record marks also the turning point in the daily school routine, without the reader knowing anything about the story or its characters so far. The direct and electric sound of Rock'n'Roll creates an immediacy of representation that has its narrative counterpart within the repetition and changes of the different timelines. Musicians and bands such as Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, Bob Dylan or The Rolling Stones represented the rebellion of a whole generation against society's standardization, and are presented accordingly in *20th Century Boys*<sup>9</sup>. The subversive power of Rock'n'Roll, and the broad public effect of related cultural events, such as that of Woodstock most famously, surpass nostalgic reference and evoke a demonic threat. For example in vol. 10 of *20th Century Boys*, the legendary American Blues musician Robert Johnson is mentioned; supposedly, Johnson was taught the secrets of guitar play by the devil himself. This anecdote—in the manga, it also functions as the birth myth of Rock'n'Roll—reveals the deliberate ambiguity of Urasawa's media references (*20th Century Boys*, Vol. 10: 27). That is to say, on the one hand, Rock'n'Roll signifies emancipation, and helps, for instance, the main character Kenji to gain the strength necessary for his personal identity, fighting for the fate of the world (see fig. 1)<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the music also symbolizes, in part, the global threat emanating from the secret organization of the *friend* that underlies the whole plot. For instance, student Ma-Kun in vol. 1 listens to the “healing CD” from the organization of the *friend* (*20th Century Boys*, Vol. 1: 118–119). Later on, it is he who is stabbing the leader of another sect with a kitchen knife.

Representations of catastrophic and horrific scenarios can also be found within Urasawa's cinematic references that range from classic Japanese anime such as

9 See Urasawa Naoki (2009): *20th Century Boys*, Vol. 4, San Francisco: Viz Media, p. 70. Originally published by Shogakukan. Here an ironic allusion towards Jimi Hendrix playing the guitar with his teeth appears in the lower right panel. While this image contains, at this point, quite caricatured features, the constant recourse to especially this early form of Rock'n'Roll discloses an emphasis on the rebellion of the juvenile population against prevailing systems.

10 See Giesa (2009) for a discussion of adolescence and pop culture/ music in comics.



Fig. 1: Urasawa Naoki (2009): *20th Century Boys*, Vol. 2, San Francisco: Viz Media, p. 147 (edited sample). Originally published by Shogakukan. The broken condition of Kenji's character is reflected in this image representing a mere mirage of him intersected by the crossbars of the window.

*Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atomu)* or *Gigantor (Tetsujin 28-go)* to American Science Fiction movies. The visual crossover between Western and Japanese pop culture is plainly seen in fig. 2, which depicts the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. Movies like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (USA 1951), *War of the Worlds* (USA 1953) or *Target Earth* (USA 1954) are proof of the vast expansion of *Alien Invasion* movies in the 1950s. The scenario of a possible World War III reverberates in the Japanese *Godzilla* movies, becoming its own genre of horror. The power of destruction by an atomic bomb is present in the images of the comics of the *Atomic Age* that unfold their very own modern version of the biblical apocalypse (see fig. 3). The Bible illustrations by the

American comics artist Basil Wolverton shown in fig. 4 relate the end of the world directly to the destruction of real cities<sup>11</sup>. In *20th Century Boys*, these intermedia references to popular culture are condensed into the concrete shape of a mysterious robot heralding the destruction of mankind on the verge of the 21st century<sup>12</sup>.

The prophetic power of these images coincides with the concept of a virtual reality. The different layers of reality are envisioned in vol. 8 of the series. There, we see Kyoko playing computer games, dressed with a head-mounted display—a crucial tool for the brainwashing methods of the organization of the *friend*. In the organisation's own amusement park *Tomodachi Land*, the sect submits its victims to the ups and downs of a rollercoaster trip, while forcing them to look at pictures which display, besides others, a burning Tokyo on New Year's Eve 2000. Dream and trauma are the recurring motifs of this play with actual and fictive realities in *Tomodachi Land*<sup>13</sup>. In vol. 10, it is the computer screen that functions as an instrument of control

11 See Meinrenken (2010) for a discussion of apocalyptic visions in comics and in the TV series *Heroes*. There (86) he exemplifies McCloud's comparison of the potential of comics with that of an atomic nucleus: only waiting to be split. (McCloud 2000: p. 243f.)

12 Illustrative examples can be found in vol. 2, p. 114 and vol. 8, pp. 40-41. Especially the latter in which a mobilized version of the *Tower of the Sun* is confronted with a fiendish, garbage-like robot impressively reveals how Urasawa toys with icons, and places them within a plot that resembles that of Science Fiction narratives or computer games.

13 See for example pages 85, 89 and 137 in Urasawa Naoki (2010): *20th Century Boys*, Vol. 8, San Francisco: Viz Media. Originally published by Shogakukan.





Fig. 4: Basil Wolverton (2009): *The Wolverton Bible*. The Old Testament & Book of Revelation through the Pen of Basil Wolverton. Seattle: Fantagraphics, p. 265. Originally, production started in the late 1950s, serialized publication started later in *The Plain Truth* (Eugene, Oregon) under the title of “The Bible Story”.

can be found on the aesthetic and narrative layers of *20th Century Boys* we will now deal with these. The variation of timelines already mentioned is interconnected with the use of different drawing techniques. The rendition of actual objects or buildings based on photographs is

thwarted by sketches which present a condensed version of the story<sup>14</sup>. This takes the form of scrawly children drawings foreclosing crucial elements of the upcoming events in *The Book of Prophecy* (see fig.

6). *The Book of Prophecy* is a small booklet in which Kenji and his schoolfriends drew their future anticipating adventures in battle against the devilish *League of Evil* when they were children. The fight with a 50m tall robot, futuristic laser weapons and the destruction of government buildings mark an essential narrative moment of the series, as they reveal an affinity to technical developments not only during that time. *The Book of Prophecy* has, however, also served the *friend* as a draft for the attacks of his organisation.

The storyboard reveals how Urasawa designs his manga pages (Hijiki 2009: 67, 82). Starting with a rough layout of the page in pencil, he details the characters and their surroundings explicitly with a nib. This technique also applies to the narrative technique of *20th Century Boys*. The constant fragmentation and repetition of visual motifs and plot moments creates a truly labyrinthine and spiral narrative structure. The recursive interlocking of childhood memories from the years 1969 through 1973 with the later, main narrative level have their counterpart in *The Book of Prophecy*,

<sup>14</sup> As can be seen for example if one compares the children’s drawings of the National Diet Building in *The Book of Prophecy* in vol. 5, p. 65 with the photorealistic depiction of the very same building in vol. 5, p. 79.



Fig. 5: Urasawa Naoki (2010): *20th Century Boys*, Vol. 10, San Francisco: Viz Media, p. 133 (edited sample). Originally published by Shogakukan. The “friend” is watching you: by means of the screen the “friend” and his organization control everyone and everything.



Fig. 6: Urasawa Naoki (2009): *20th Century Boys*, Vol. 5, San Francisco: Viz Media, p. 61. Originally published by Shogakukan. In *The Book of Prophecy* the idea that 'man forges its own fate' becomes tragic reality—at least within the narrative. The small size of the booklet also resembles the underlying artistic concept of eye and hand: what the hand perceives, the eye perceives as well. The *friend* perceived what was drawn and puts it into practice. Kenji and his friends, on the other hand, also have to perceive what was drawn, but their view is bound backwards in time to reconstruct what they were planning, in order to prevent the fate of the world orchestrated by the friend.

in regard to the graphic style as well as the contents. What begins as a mere childish fantasy, grows into the threatening presence of adults. The narrative modes of analepsis and metalepsis<sup>15</sup> are the most prominent stylistic devices throughout the whole series. Two narrative levels can be identified: On the one level, the years 1997 through 1999 see Kenji and his comrades uncover that the “*friend*” must be one of their childhood friends. On the other level, the year 2014 has Kenji’s niece Kanna uniting rivaling groups in battle against the *friend*. All other timelines are personal narrations or characters’ memories.

The multilayered narrative interreferentiality between text and image manifests itself in the historic broadcasting of the landing on the moon on July 20<sup>th</sup> 1969, which is watched by Kenji’s friend Donkey who stays up all night in front of the TV screen (*20th Century Boys*, Vol. 1: 126-130). The images from the satellite create a white noise on the TV-screen, allowing only an intermittent view of the actual event. Urasawa’s play with the visibility and invisibility of the presentation reappears in the secret identity of the *friend*. His true character might be exposed but his face remains covered, due to a mask and the fact that only isolated parts of his face become visible. As is the case with the first landing on the moon, the riddle of his secret identity is a play with the possibility of representation. This is reminiscent of installations by the Korean media artist Nam June Paik, who transferred the white noise of a TV set into the artistic domain at the beginning of the 1960s (see Hanhardt 2000). Those artistic references allude to the deeper symbolic relevance of

the plot of *20th Century Boys*.

This becomes most recognizable in the references to the Worldfair Expo '70

15 Understood in the tradition of French theorist Gérard Genette (1998). Genette uses the term of analepsis to categorize flashbacks in a narration which in *20th Century Boys* can be found in the numerous memory processes. Genette uses the term metalepsis to categorize paradoxical transgressions of logical narrative levels, e. g. a book that contains itself just as in *20th Century Boys* where *The Book of Prophecies* quasi contains the lives of Kenji and his friends.

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in Osaka<sup>16</sup>. From this world exposition, Urasawa borrows not only the idea of a time capsule in which children place their trophies<sup>17</sup>, but also the *Tower of the Sun*. As a symbolic motif it has already appeared in *The Book of Prophecy (20th Century Boys*, vol. 5: 61), peace and humanity in accordance with the Expo's motto "Progress and harmony for mankind". The time capsule, on the other hand, serves as an objective embodiment of the different timelines of the plot. It encloses important clues for the uncovering of the *friend's* identity, but it also has a long tradition in the art of the 20th century and in art in general. There, it points to the complicated liaison of culture, memory and remembrance. A most prominent example are Andy Warhol's time capsules—a collection of 610 cardboard boxes stuffed with everyday objects, photographs, works of art, and numerous other materials (see Görner 2003).

The children's time capsule contains probably the most important symbol in *20th Century Boys*: the *friend* logo, an image that penetrates the whole manga and seizes different carriers (see fig. 7). The divine image of the all-seeing eye finds its symbolic culmination in connection with the hand. The sign of the cross combining eye and hand has seen a multitude of interpretations as a prophetic motif throughout cultural history. It is part of the one-dollar note as well as a symbol of the divine trinity. In theological exegesis, it is ascribed the ability to look into the most mysterious future and to grasp the most remote of events. In such an analogy the recursive repetitions and time loops throughout the plot of *20th Century Boys* gain their symbolic counterpart: in the course of the narrative, past, present and future merge into one plotline.

At the same time, the symbolic fusion of eye and hand lends itself to the fundamental concept of any artist's work: The hand draws what the eye sees. On closer inspection, *20th Century Boys* often emphasizes hands as well as parts of the face and the eyes<sup>18</sup>. Close-ups of eyes and hands establish an interaction between the characters and the reader and address them directly, as for example in the very dynamic scene in which Kanna and an assassin face off (vol. 9, p. 184). Addressing the reader directly by pointing a finger at him has a large tradition in Western movie and poster art. It reaches from James Montgomery Flagg's *Uncle Sam Wants You*

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16 See *Structure, space, mankind* (1970) for details on EXPO '70.

17 See *Time Capsule EXPO '70* [<http://panasonic.net/history/timecapsule/index.html>], a homepage that documents the time capsule project for EXPO '70. See also *The official record of time capsule EXPO '70* (1980), which understands the time capsule as a *gift to the people of the future from the people of the present day*, as the subtitle infers.

18 Their importance for Urasawa as well as his respective efforts can be seen in his breakdowns and scribbles. See for graphic samples Hijiki (2009, pp. 75-81).

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and Edwin S. Porter's movie *The Great Train Robbery*, to the horror cinema of the Canadian director David Cronenberg, and even Scott McCloud's comics theory, in which the character directly addresses the reader (McCloud 1994: 24–59).

Eye and hand are signs of self-referentiality, by which Urasawa presents himself as the creator of *20th Century Boys*. Last but not least, his similarity with Kenji is highly visible, which directly becomes obvious if one places a photograph of Urasawa next to a panel with Kenji in it. The artistic and personal identity of Urasawa as both a musician and a manga artist has its echo in the multiple temporal and spatial leaps. Thus *20th Century Boys* can be interpreted as a parable for manga (and comics) as a medium of pictorial narration for a whole generation but on a personal level.

Urasawa uses a variety of artistic strategies which, in his manga function as a kind of reminiscence. With the basic theme of a conspiratorial, dictatorial sect, a



Fig. 7: Urasawa Naoki (2003): *20th Century Boys*, Vol. 5, Stuttgart: Planet Manga (Panini), p. 61. Originally published by Shogakukan. The symbols of eye and hand on the container from the children's past induce that Kenji and his group have to come to terms with their past.

further topic unfolds, which specifically relates to Japanese history—especially the sarin gas attacks of Aum Sect. Accordingly, *20th Century Boys* is a product of the last century. The personalities and identities of its characters have their roots there but overcome the uncertainty of the year 2000 (2YK)<sup>19</sup>.

The above sketch might have demonstrated the necessity of comparative studies of comics and manga in order to provide a broader, cross-cultural understanding of individual graphic narratives. Urasawa depicts not just Kenji or the friend, but the fundamental characteristics of a whole century—that is the point of our reading. His manga offers a global perspective, mainly based on references to popular icons and music, which have been increasingly shared worldwide since the 1960s. It is precisely these obvious similarities that raise the question of which cultural differences remain.

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<sup>19</sup> See on this specifically Dorsey (2011). It is possible to view the 20th century as a period of constant war and traumata that were overcome together on a global scale. Most recently, this applies to the disaster in Fukushima.

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