MANGA FLOWS: READING THE PANELED SPREAD AGAINST HANDSCROLL AND WEBTOON

Jaqueline Berndt
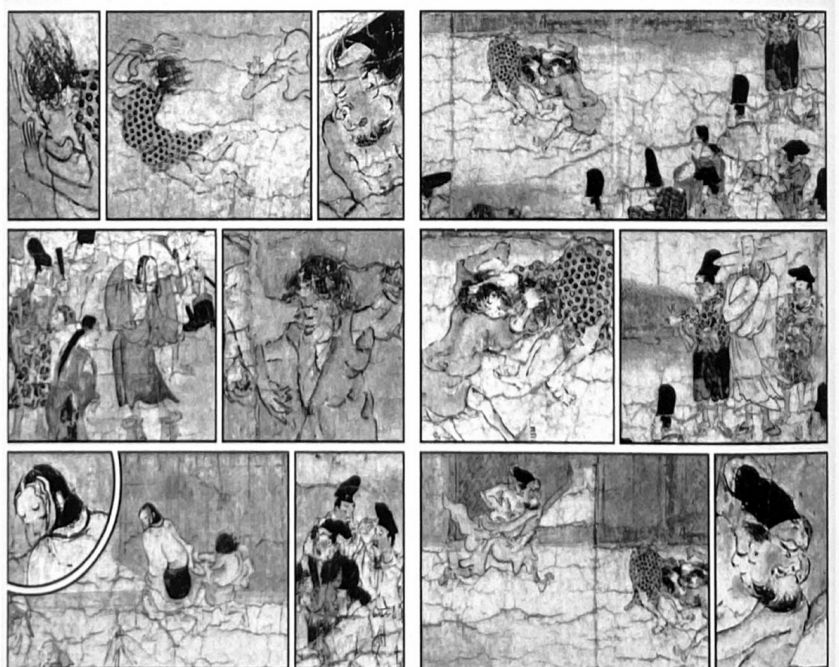

fig. 1
Takahata Isao (1935–2018), *Panelling of the Scene*
"The Kid's Quarrel" in Ban Dainagon Ekotoba, in Takahata,
1999, p. 86, reproduced with kind permission of the
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Introductions to premodern Japanese art and literature have increasingly included references to manga. But the type of manga referred to is no longer the cartoonesque drawing as represented by the twelfth- to thirteenth-century illuminated handscrolls *Frolicking Animals (Chōjū jinbutsu giga)* that have also been noted for their anthropomorphic characters, humor, or the occasional employment of comics-like motion lines.[1] Today, manga is mainly associated with pictorial reading material, or "story manga," to borrow the Japanese Anglicism most widely used for narrative comics. Art historians maintain that "Japan is a land of fascinating tales, with a long and rich tradition of pairing narrative texts with elaborate illustrations—a tradition that continues to this day with manga and other forms of animation and graphic art."[2] And literary scholars point out that Muromachi tales (*otogizōshi*) were "often richly illustrated in a painted-scroll format that foreshadows today's world of manga, anime, and science fiction."[3]

Apart from grouping comics together with animated film and other forms of popular fiction, it is noteworthy that modern story manga is seen as sharing many traits with illuminated narrative handscrolls (*emaki*), notwithstanding differences in media and materiality such as print and painting, monochromy and polychromy, typography and calligraphy. In art historical discourse, the alternation of words and images takes center stage, frequently complemented by dialogue inserted into the artwork (*gachūshi*) and therefore appearing "much like the speech or thought balloons in modern Japanese manga."[4] Attention is further paid to the similar manner in which the audience determines the pace of reception as they proceed from right to left in the Japanese reading direction, be it unfurling a handscroll or turning the pages of a book. Whether listening to a narrator while watching the images, or enjoying the narratives quietly on one's own, both *emaki* and manga stand out as intimate formats meant to be enjoyed in privacy.

Yet, despite so many shared traits, manga literacy does not necessarily prepare us for appreciating traditional narrative scrolls. One great hurdle is the lack of scripts, in the sense of widely known stories and actual scenarios. Another obstacle is the recognizability of the main characters. Although *emaki* storytelling saw significant changes historically, some features remained: classic handscrolls do not aid narrative focalization visually by means of close-ups, nor do they individualize faces. Identification of the figures relies instead on previous knowledge. In contrast, modern manga tells even broadly shared stories as if they were new, marketing them to the broadest possible audience for individual consumption and fueling the appetite for ever fresh material. Since the 1950s manga narratives have been serialized in weeklies and monthlies, and in the late 1960s the most popular serials began to be reprinted in book editions. This twofold business model formed the backbone of the industry until the mid-2000s. It facilitated the manga-typical visual "flow" as it helped to fill pages. It proved successful because publishers compartmentalized their target audience along the lines of age and gender, developing the genres of *shōnen* (boys), *shōjo* (girls), *seinen* (youth), and *josei* (women's) manga.

Historically, manga began as entertaining reading material for children but unlike "high-quality" picturebooks, it hardly leaned on guidance by educators. Manga copies were exchanged among classmates, at least prior to the internet age, and girls in particular read their favorite parts to each other. Individual consumption increased with manga's maturation. Outside of Japan, manga spread as a media of adolescents and young adults, predominantly female. They had long been neglected by comics publishers, which made them the most receptive to what manga had to offer. This included community-building capacities centered around character illustrations, fan fiction, and cosplay (i.e., fans "playing" popular characters by means of wearing "costumes," mainly at fan-cultural events). Yet the attraction took its departure from serialized graphic narratives and their media-specific techniques of captivating the individual reader.

Semiotically, panels laid out on printed pages have been regarded as *the* most essential constituent of story manga, last but not least against continuous narrative *emaki*. Sequences of panels in diverse scales and shapes, whose visual contents are revealed in a variety of "shot" sizes and angles, were at the core of the industrial notion of manga from the 1950s to the early 2000s, beginning with pioneer Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989). In contrast to prewar serials of children's manga such as *Norakuro* (1931–1941) by Tagawa Suihō (1899–1989) with their steady "theatrical" perspective, Tezuka's *Kimba, the White Lion* (*Janguru taitei*, 1950–1954) and other works appeared "cinematic."

Decades later "cinematic" manga techniques were used to make illuminated handscrolls accessible to modern audiences. Animation director Takahata Isao (1935–2018), for example, broke up a "polyphase" *emaki* segment into panels and arranged them in linear order on a double-page spread, thereby fixating variations in the frame of vision that *emaki* viewers would perform through their embodied gaze (fig. 1).[5]

Takahata's experiment attested to both manga's technical potential for nonverbal storytelling and the by then established prevalence of the double-page spread

fig. 2
Christina Plaka, *Tanuki vs. Zodiac 12* (2020), *shōnen*-manga page layout, p. 3, 250 × 35.3 cm, original drawing for the exhibition *Manga: Reading the Flow*, Museum Rietberg, 2021, courtesy Christina Plaka

(*mihiraki*) as the standard surface for printed manga. Manga programs at Japanese art colleges cling to the related norm of organizing the narrative flow, as a recent remediation of entire premodern handscrolls evinces.[6] This norm privileges progressive transition from panel to panel at the expense of the interplay between panels and page, or sequentiality and simultaneity. Moreover, it does not facilitate complex narrative structures including flashbacks or alternations between outer reality and inner thoughts. In short, it clearly favors the plot-driven standard of masculine genres (*shōnen* and *seinen*).

The underlying assumption that one panel represents one camera shot also appears limited as relates to cinema. Takahata's interest in narrative handscrolls was initially inspired by film critic Imamura Taihei (1911–1986) and his theory of *manga film*, a deviation from "theories of cinematic realism, which have tended to treat indexicality as a form of one-point referentiality based on a moment of indexical contact or capture."[7] This "moment" has little correspondence with manga film—that is, drawn animation, Japanese traditions of narrative painting, or mature story manga. While manga has tended to "cinematically" uncompress the compact scenes in *emaki*, as of today, it layers moments and views in its own way on the spread as well as within panels.[8] A simplistic "cinematic" approach risks disregarding this multiplicity and, consequently, the recipient's agency. It is precisely against this background that the artist Yamaguchi Akira (b. 1969) balks against paneling as manga's principal characteristic. Although he perceives his own paintings as unconnected to both traditional narrative handscrolls and modern manga, he attaches similar importance to the "time of the eye." His large prints, for example, let the gaze wander across a picture plane from scene to scene, each invoking small narratives but not complying to a predetermined trajectory.[9]

The comparison between traditional *emaki* and modern manga certainly calls for a broader concept than that mentioned above, a concept that considers materialities in line with the agency of readers and their expectations toward media-specific conventions of storytelling. *The Poetry Contest of the Twelve Animals* (*Jūnirui uta awase*), a set of three mid-seventeenth-century narrative handscrolls in the collection of the Chester Beatty (see cat. 102), lends itself to such a comparison. After all, it has been described as "the earliest known example of a non-human tale (*iruimono*) set entirely in the animal world" that "cleverly parodies and plays off of, in both words and images, three standard genres of illustrated fiction: poetry exchanges, military tales, and stories of religious enlightenment."[10] In addition to parodic play (a topic not addressed in this article), the interrelation of

text and image, as well as anthropomorphic animals, will strike contemporary readers as manga-typical traits. Animal characters, such as Kimba, the lion king, or the dog Norakuro (modeled on Felix the Cat), have historically contributed their share but contemporary manga exercises restraint in that regard. Accordingly, a standard reworking of the *Poetry Contest* would feature human characters, and this is exactly what happens in *Tanuki vs. Zodiac 12*, an original production by Christina Plaka (b. 1983).[11] The first two out of five double spreads introduce the protagonist and the contemporary setting, while the remaining three serve to highlight manga's stylistic diversity by adapting iconic scenes from the source work in the style of different genres. Yet however different the page compositions, the panels are not necessarily confined to "cinematic" shots, not even in the masculine *shōnen* style (fig. 2).

Characters exceed panel borders. Their faces appear in the same panel with what they are actually seeing or merely visualizing. And the protagonist's body is split across two panels to extend a moment of tension. The panels clearly act in concert, involving the reader visually in a continuum that conjoins horizontal, vertical, and diagonal vectors across pages but not always in strictly linear progression.

At the center of Plaka's manga take is a young man named Tanuki ("racoon dog"), a "shut-in" (*hikikomori*) who connects to the outside world mainly through his computer. He aspires to recognition by the *Zodiac 12*, his favorite troupe of Hip Hop dancers, but they reject him. To take revenge, Tanuki mobilizes other marginalized youth. This is presented in the largely regular page layout and restraint-character design of *seinen* manga. Physical action rendered in spectacular *shōnen*-manga style prevails in the scene of the decisive dance battle that Tanuki's side loses. The final spread focuses on his feelings after the defeat by means of *shōjo*-manga devices like inner monologue, unframed panels, and flower symbols (fig. 3).

Ultimately overcoming his vengeful and competitive impulses, Tanuki sets out for a new life. What kind of life that might be, is left open, that is, for the audience to picture, just like the final judgment on the behavior of all parties involved. Where the medieval tale draws a clear line between the forces of law and order (the twelve animals) and the finally chastened trickster (the racoon dog-turned-monk), manga tends to avoid binaries such as good vs. evil. This inclination also shows in *Asaki yumemishi* (*Fleeting Dreams*, 1980–1993), a *shōjo*-manga adaptation of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) by Yamato Waki (b. 1948): "Yamato even attempts to humanize the mysterious Lady Rokujō, fleshing out her backstory and visually depicting her passionate affair with the

fig. 3
Christina Plaka, *Tanuki vs. Zodiac 12 (2020)*, *shōjo*-manga-like page layout, p. 10 (final page), 25 × 35.3 cm, original drawing for the exhibition *Manga: Reading the Flow*, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, 2021, courtesy Christina Plaka

young Genji to make the later wrath of her jealous spirit more understandable to the contemporary reader."[12]

Since the 1970s *Genji* manga have proliferated, and not all are adaptations that help to pass the typically Japanese university entrance exams. The latest instantiation is a time-travel narrative titled *Ii ne! Hikaru Genji-kun* by est em.[13] Here, the fictional Prince Genji ends up in the apartment of a young "office lady" living in contemporary Tokyo. While longing for home in the distant past, he impresses the women around him with his sensitivity, in real life as well as online, and he takes great pleasure in collecting social-media "likes"—*ii ne!* in Japanese—for his selfies and *waka* (i.e., thirty-one-syllable classical poems). In addition to *waka*, traditionally "a staple of women's education,"[14] artist est em accommodates the female readership of the magazine, which has been running the serial since December 2015, by having her beautiful protagonist fall for sweets such as "Matcha Frappechino" (fig. 4).[15]

Even though the manga installments are called *emaki* instead of "episode" or "chapter," the link to premodern tradition remains superficial. Only elderly characters exhibit a solid knowledge of the classics. Superficiality also prevails visually, with an emphasis

placed on close-ups at the expense of background. This appears indicative of the flattening out of both the literary classic and modern manga paneling in young women's culture of today.

Both painted narrative handscroll and printed manga rest on physical support, and they unfold their narrative section by section while abiding mainly to a horizontal vector of progression. Such commonalities stand out in juxtaposition to webtoons, a recent type of digital comics that waive panel breakdowns and page-turns in favor of a continuous vertical flow reminiscent of scrolls but in fact operated on touch-screens by swiping (fig. 5).

Compared to the affordances of the printed page and the aesthetic options cultivated within its limits since the 1970s, today's webtoons, or smart-phone comics, present themselves as a form of simplification, at least in view of readers' active engagement with paneled spreads. Digital technology facilitates the use of color, animation, and sound but the reader's gaze does not wander, as Koo Bonwon (b. 1980) demonstrates in her remediation of Plaka's manga pages.[16] The gaze

moves usually only once from top to bottom and stays locked in place thereafter while images and text lines roll by continuously, one at a time, as if retaining the cinematographic "moment." In order to be practical (and commercially viable) webtoons have to make do with small screens and short attention spans. Consequently, they opt for the opposite of diverse visual trails, or the "infinite canvas."[17] The "indeterminacy of the frame"[18] so crucial for both *emaki* and modern story manga gets lost, as does the surprise awaiting the reader upon turning a page or reaching the punch line that concludes a four-panel comic strip. This witty strip format is employed by Koizumi Yoshihiro (b. 1953) in *Ōzukami Genji Monogatari, maro, n?* (*Getting the Gist of The Tale of Genji, I / Chestnut?*, 2002), a parody that condenses almost each of the tale's fifty-four chapters into just two strips or eight panels.

Manga fiction is known for its effective graphic storytelling, for offering a "flow" to immerse oneself in. Distinct from European comics and their occasional inclination to arrest the gaze in individual images, in manga a transindividual "flow" comes to the fore, and it

did so long before the emergence of webtoons. This "flow" has manifested in techniques of guiding the reader's gaze that facilitate complex narrative developments and rich affective pleasure. Yet digital conditions may give way to new types of flow and a different manga literacy.

1   For an overview from the perspective of Manga Studies, see Berndt, 2016.

2   Watanabe, 2011, p. 3.

3   Shirane, 2018, p. 2.

4   Shirane, 2018, p. 4.

5   Takahata, 1999, p. 86.

6   Ôtsuka and Yamamoto, eds., 2020.

7   Lamarre, 2014, pp. 228–29.

8   Suzuki, 2014, pp. 57–86.

9   See Yamaguchi, 2012.

10   Thompson, 2018, p. 385.

11   Christina Plaka is a German manga artist of Greek descent, who debuted in 2003 and obtained an MA degree from Kyoto Seika University's Graduate School of Manga in 2012. She is now running her own manga school in Offenbach.

12   McCormick, 2019, p. 323.

13   Est em debuted in 2006; she acquired initial renown in the subgenre of boys-love manga.

14   Shirane, 2018, p. 5. The numerous *waka* inserted in the manga are original contributions by established classical poets.

15   *Ii ne! Hikaru Genji-kun* is serialized in *Feel Young* and to date has appeared in four book volumes. It was also adapted for a TV mini-series (NHK, Spring 2020).

16   Trained as a manga artist at Kyoto Seika University (2005–2015), Koo Bonwon has been teaching manga creation at Japanese universities since 2013. Koo, 2018, p. 173.

17   McCloud, 2020, pp. 220–29.

18   Central concept in Itô Gô, *Tezuka izu deddo* (Tokyo, 2005), referring to the recipient's changing focus on panel and page.
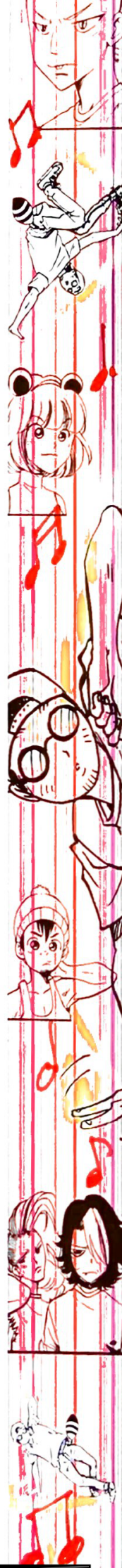

fig. 5
Koo Bonwon, remediation of the first four pages of Christina Plaka's *Tanuki vs. Zodiac 12* into a webtoon, a digital comic to be scrolled, or swiped, upwards on a smartphone touchscreen; original creation for the exhibition *Manga: Reading the Flow*, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, 2021, courtesy Koo Bonwon and Christina Plaka

Love,
Fight,
Feast

**The Multifaceted World
of Japanese Narrative Art**