Special Feature

More Mangaesque than the Manga: "Cartooning" in the *Kimetsu no Yaiba* Anime

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Kimetsu no Yaiba (*Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*, henceforth *Kimetsu*) has attracted attention as an extraordinary example of transmediality, but it also raises awareness of media specificity: on the one hand, with respect to the specific mediality of anime (as a distinct type of entertaining fiction resting on animation) and manga (as printed graphic narrative); on the other hand, with respect to a broad notion of media specificity that interrelates representational forms with those of circulation, institutions and practices of use in order to accommodate the recognizability of anime and manga as distinct media, ongoing as it is even under conditions of media convergence. This paper approaches such media specificity through an intermedial lens on the example of mangaesque elements in the *Kimetsu* TV anime (Ufotable 2019, 26 episodes), which are not only abundant but also more prominent than in the source work, Gotouge Koyoharu's manga series (2016-2020, Jump Comics, 23 vols). One example are 'chibi instances,' namely abrupt changes of characters into distorted versions of themselves. In the manga, such instances are featured mainly in small panels that occupy an eighth to a sixth of the single page, and often placed in the bottom-left corner, that is, the in-between position of the cliff-hanger.

The *Kimetsu* anime appears mangaesque in several regards. These shall be outlined briefly before taking a closer look at the chibi instances mentioned above. First, there is the citation of paneled and monochrome manga pages in the post-credit sequences where the anime's protagonists provide a preview of the next episode. Second are anime-typical freeze-frame, or just partly animated, shots that feature characters posing or channel the viewer's attention to evoke the comics medium, famously defined by Scott McCloud as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence."[1] From the perspective of animation instead of comics, the characterization of anime as "dynamic immobility" by Marc Steinberg comes to mind,[2] but mangaesque devices exceed the latter. They include, third, the occasional use of abstract backgrounds in motion, consisting, for example, solely of parallel lines, or broad streaks of brushed ink on the right and left edges of the

screen. Likewise reminiscent of comics' "visual language" in the *Kimetsu* anime are the waves of the protagonists' Water Breathing technique and the arrows of one of his demon antagonists, the flower band that heralds the entrance of Dr. Tamayo, or plumes and wafts of mist elsewhere.[3] Comicana and manga-typical pictograms convey what is intradiegetically hidden from view, insubstantial and momentary things like scents and energies. Graphic conventions such as sparks and beams, three little flowers, or spirals, hovering above Zenitsu's head, dotted lines around his trembling body, snot bubbles indicating sleepiness or exhaustion, and cruciform popping veins, the ultimate manga sign of rage, do surface frequently in the *Kimetsu* anime and prominently at that.

Playful elements shared with comics – emanata, momentum lines, sweat beads and the like – are part of cartooning, understood not in the narrow sense of animated cartoon but as "graphic simplification of figurative shapes for purposes of communication."[4] Their employment is reminiscent of early drawn animation, stretching from Max Fleischer's *Out of the Inkwell* (1918-29) and Disney's *Alice Comedies* (1923-27)[5] to the *Norakuro* shorts (1933-38). As André Molotiu writes, "Because cartooning goes beyond simple visual mimesis, it can supplement the visual experience with evocations of elements perceptible only by other senses than sight – or by the mind's eye."[6] Yet, in the course of film history, cartooning gave way to diegesis and character animation. It was easily associated with a lack in technology and compensation thereof by means of borrowing from another medium, namely, comics, a stance that may also associate traditional notions of anime as "limited" in the broader sense.

Cartooning has, arguably, received more theoretical attention in comics studies than in animation research.[7] This is in part due to the conceptual attempts made by McCloud. He foregrounded the cartoon as a pictorial mode of stylization and explained its smiley-like abstraction as an invitation to enter a storyworld through identification with the cartoonized character — as "a picture that engages the reader in a gaze directed at them."[8] According to McCloud, the reader puts on the cartoon face like a mask. Stephan Packard has identified three types: gradual cartoonization of one and the same character or object; categorial cartoonization as symbolic differentiation between groups of characters; and a "third semiotic space" (2006, 137-41) that conjoins iconic, indexical and symbolic properties in a complex way, exemplified in Art Spiegelman's representation of Jews as mice, Donald Duck's not-duck-like behavior, or – to add a Japanese example – the sudden reversal of hair "color" in shōjo manga.[9] In the "third semiotic space," icons are recognized but not necessarily in correspondence to real life; indexical relations develop within the storyworld but also between image and recipient; "literacy" leans on familiarity with conventions, arbitrarily established and shared symbols that work metaphorically.

Similarly, Molotiu maintains that cartoon simplification may take different levels within one and the same work of comics, and he even mentions manga: "The level of simplification can also vary from character to character (as, for instance, in the work of Jaime Hernandez, where children are often rendered more 'cartoonishly' than adults) and between different renderings of the same character in different panels (a traditional device in manga)."[10] Within a manga context, the latter is known as chibi. The chibi is mainly understood to manifest in an exaggerated ("super deformed") midget figure with an oversized head, playing a supporting role and, by virtue of its cute chubby appearance, affording merchandise figures. But more important with regard to *Kimetsu* as mangaesque is chibi-fication, that is, "characters 'turning' into emoticon versions of themselves during moments of emotional duress."[11]

Midget versions of one and the same character visualize affective states – uncontrollable temper, immense exertion, or physical pain. In *Kimetsu* this metafictional device is mainly used to highlight boyish behavior in slice-of-life sequences: boys measuring their strength with other boys (for example, Yushiro and Tanjiro, but also Inosuke), teasing each other, getting embarrassed in front of girls they like, or chickening out of a challenge (especially Zenitsu). Neither demons nor mature humans undergo such deformation, apart from a very few exceptions (for example, Zenitsu's grandfather in retrospect). As a matter of fact, most of the demons exhibit an uncanny bodily malleability, especially during battle sequences, but, in principle, their morality and actions do not change as long as they are able to fight. The same holds true for the homunculi, the personified seven deadly sins, in Arakawa Hiromu's manga *Full Metal Alchemist* (2001-10): They stay locked in their selfish instincts and consequently their standard body shape, whereas Edgar, one of the protagonists, may even turn into a stickman at times and otherwise assume ballet-like splay legs.[12] In other words, chibi-fication as pictorial distortion tends to facilitate fluid narrative identities, up to and including the vacillation of manga personae between "round characters" and free-floating kyara. As such chibi-fication goes far beyond mere on-the-side gags.

In contrast to its name, chibi-fication is not necessarily a matter of body size and child-like proportions, but rather exaggeration. In *Kimetsu* it applies primarily to the face. Especially salient is the mutability of the eyes. Big attractive eyes reminiscent of the shōjo-manga tradition pop out suddenly and turn into grotesquely veined eyeballs that seem to be derived from horror manga by Hino Hideshi or Itō Junji. Pupils are dilated, widened by fear, or completely omitted, if not reduced to button eyes. Characters wearing fox masks or a boar head deprive the artist of this means of emotive expression (while also saving her the respective effort). But in general, the central role of the face and the eyes as a gateway for the reader to enter the storyworld is another aspect that suggests under-

standing chibi-fication as cartoonization.

This kind of cartoonization, however, is not gradual, but abrupt. It jeopardizes both visual-stylistic and narrative-diegetic coherence, which has caused occasional discontent with the *Kimetsu* anime in English-language fan criticism. In this anime, the metamorphosis of a respectable, handsome or pretty character into a pictorially exaggerated chibi, which is reinforced by auditory exaggeration (a fast-paced musical score and the respective character raising hue and cry) does not appear smoothly animated, but rather edited or assembled. In his discussion of figurative acting as central to anime's identity, Stevie Suan points to minor movements or even still images as producing a sensation of movement where gaps in continuity are exposed, and sudden changes, or rapid switches, are the norm.[13] One instantiation of figurative acting is chibi-fication. Molotiu calls this "graphic acting" after all.[14]

Chibi-fication may, arguably, serve to distinguish anime from "animation made in Japan." Found rather in the more openly structured TV series format than in bounded authorial "works" such as the animated movies by Miyazaki Hayao or Oshii Mamoru, chibi-fication presents itself as an example of what Thomas Lamarre conceptualized as more or less TV-specific "switching" – between different parts of one and the same anime episode (from opening to commercial inserts), episodes of one and the same series, channels, and media.[15] From an aesthetic perspective, this can be extended to include switching, or alternation, between first and third person narrative perspectives, (more or less "realist"-representational) seriousness and playful comicality, cuteness and horror, visible picture object and invisible referential meaning.[16] "Switching" may also apply to genders and generations and as such explain also the wide-ranging domestic appeal of *Kimetsu*.

In consideration of the above, the abundance of mangaesque elements in the *Kimetsu* anime appears not just as an intermedial gesture towards the manga in order to boost the latter's sales, and it does not necessarily help to substantiate the anime's conservatism either. With regard to media specificity in a broad sense, the following issues come to the fore:

1. Cartooning, and chibi-fication at that, serves as comic relief. It has been associated with childlikeness and with promoting a harmless appearance. In view of *Full Metal Alchemist*, Li-chi Chen and Eryk Hajndrych note that chibi-fication "helps to ease the tension and the serious atmosphere of the main plot."[17] This can be applied to the often-queried representation of physical violence in *Kimetsu* as well. The effect of comic relief is facilitated by the jerkiness in anime's rhythm which allows for a certain type of humor, according to Suan, but also by the fact that the visible picture object (the chibi version of the respective character) is not to be taken at face value with regard to its referential meaning within the storyworld.[18] Just like a speech balloon, the chibi is

visible to the audience but not to the other intradiegetic characters. It opens up a "third semiotic space" and, thus, it raises the question of how literally the representation of violence is to be taken, with respect to what type of audience.

2. In *Kimetsu*, cartooning as chibi-fication serves also as an inclusive device, especially against the backdrop of manga's gendered genres. As Nakata Atsuhiko has aptly demonstrated, the ensemble of characters consists of a clever mix of types rooted in shōnen manga as well as shōjo manga.[19] Tanjiro, the protagonist, is not fighting to test his own capabilities, but to save his sister, and his kind, unambitious, humble personality has apparently appealed to female audiences in particular. Nezuko is a real partner to him, not only in need of protection but also providing protection to her brother and his peers. In addition to the characters, Nakata notes that the anime introduces audiences unfamiliar with monologues in manga to this crucial device of shōjo-manga storytelling. Like its source work, the anime begins with Tanjiro soliloquizing, while his mouth stays closed. At other points in the series, monologues are cushioned, or excused, by writing a diary or reading out a letter, and an off-screen narration may turn out to be an intradiegetic speech. Overall, the *Kimetsu* anime features plenty of such "monologues," information-wise bordering on redundancy sometimes, yet beyond the information apparently another device of affectively involving the reader.

3. Not only do monologues and the generally cute character design give a generically feminine impression, but so also does the clean linework on predominantly white backgrounds, as well as the inclination towards decorative surface compositions at the expense of palpable spaces with depth. Historically, shōjo manga has had a close relationship with chibi, in particular the genre's slice-of-life and school-comedy strands. Bearing this in mind, the chibi instances involving Zenitsu, Inosuke, and also Tanjiro – and the way in which they are narratively framed – appear at times as a parody on the masculinity initially promoted by shōnen manga and the respective anime adaptations, namely, the foregrounding of "(male) friendship, struggle, victory" while leaving emotions, interpersonal relations, and the joys of everydayness to the feminine media realm.

4. Media specificity calls for considering also contemporary modes of consumption.[20] In *Kimetsu*, cartooning as chibi-fication serves as an attention-seeking device which seems to correspond with discontinuous ways of consuming fiction via moving-image media platforms, namely, "in bits," or the video digest format. Binge-watching, too, promotes "jumping" from attraction to attraction, or "switching" between highlights. Although technically discontinuous due to panels laid out on printed and as such fixed pages, manga hampers anime's potential to be prone to fragmented consumption, even when digitalized, and precisely this may explain the lesser prominence of chibi instances in the source work. Reception "in bits" distracts from contemplating narratives and their

ideological implications on the whole. This again connects to the "gamic" impression that the *Kimetsu* anime gives, with respect to its serialized narrative and the levels of challenge therein, but more so the digital animation with its camera movements reminiscent of video games. Scott Bukatman has observed that cartooniness is embraced by gamers whenever speed running, or modifying, a game.[21] Consuming anime "in bits" may easily evoke such types of gaming. Thus, the global success of the *Kimetsu* anime "speaks to the ongoing normalization of fannish interests and lifestyles, including manga, anime and related media and material. Indeed, aren't we all sort of being cultivated into fan audiences by streaming services and social media?"[22]

To sum up, this paper started out from pictorial characteristics that appear as mangaesque: juxtaposed stills, visual morphemes, pictograms, and "chibi instances." It introduced concepts of cartooning and cartoonization as developed in comics studies to understand chibi-fication in anime in its faciality and abruptness as a materially aesthetic change in register that points to fluid identities – of characters as actors, (gendered) genres, and modes of reception, or consumption. The involved comicality appeared to be a parodic one and as such open to both being harmless and subversive, downplaying socio-political change and undermining fixity. These two vectors manifest in the relation between the verbal-narrative rejection of change in the *Kimetsu* anime and its visual and auditory mutability, as animated metamorphosis and as switching.

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Endnote

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2 Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

3 Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

4 André Molotiu, "Cartooning," in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, eds. Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 153. DOI: https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813591452-012

5 See Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Animation: A World History*, vol. I. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 38, and Donald Crafton, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 221-56.

6   André Molotiu, "Cartooning", 167.

7   See especially the work by comics scholars Stephan Packard, *Anatomie des Comics: Psychosemiotische Medienanalyse* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006) and Christopher Pizzino, "The Cartoon on the Comics Page: A Phenomenology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 115-131. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190917944.013.8

8   Stephan Packard, "The Drawn-Out Gaze of the Cartoon: A Psychosemiotic Look at Subjectivity in Comic Book Storytelling," in *Subjectivity across Media: Interdisciplinary and Transmedial Perspectives*, eds. Maike S. Reinerth and Jan-Noël Thon, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 119.

9   Stephan Packard, "The Drawn-Out Gaze of the Cartoon", 137-141.

10   André Molotiu, "Cartooning," 169 n.2.

11   Lukas Wilde, "Material Conditions and Semitiotic Affordances: Natsume Fusanosuke's Many Fascinations with the Lines of Manga," *Mechademia* 12:2 (Spring 2020): 71.

12   For a discussion of this series as an example of manga proper, see Jaqueline Berndt, "Mangaesque," in *Japanese Media and Popular Culture: An Open-Access Digital Initiative of the University of Tokyo*, eds. Jason G. Karlin, Patrick W. Galbraith, and Shunsuke Nozawa. https://jmpc-utokyo.com/keyword/mangaesque/ (last accessed: 1 May 2021).

13   Stevie Suan, "Anime no ʻkōishaʼ: animēshon ni okeru taigenteki/shūjiteki pafōmansu ni yoru ʻjikoʼ," *Animēshon kenkyū* 19.1 (2017): 3-15.

14   André Molotiu, "Cartooning," 168.

15   Thomas Lamarre, "Anime. Compositing and switching: An intermedial history of Japanese anime," in *The Japanese Cinema Book*, eds. Hideaki Fujiki und Alistair Phillips (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 318-19.

16   For the latter see Wilde (2020).

17   Li-Chi Chen and Eryk Hajndrych, "Comicbook characters' facial features and actions and movements as two sources of humour: the case of Fullmetal Alchemist," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* [pre-print, 2020]: 18pp. DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2020.1826548

18   See Wilde (2020) for an English-language reference to the theory developed by Packard (2006).

19   Nakata Atsuhiko, "Kimetsu no yaiba (2)," in: *Nakata no daihitto daigaku*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktJkqo1TpB8 (last accessed: 1 May 2021).

20   I would like to thank Gan Sheuo Hui (Singapore) for sharing her ideas with me in this regard.

21   See Scott Bukatman 2014.

22   Patrick Galbraith, "Interview: Patrick Galbraith discusses his book, Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan," *CaMP Anthropology*, March 8, 2021: https://campanthropology.org/?s=Galbraith&submit=Search (last accessed: 1 May 2021).