

Manga as “Popular Culture”? – Implications of English and Japanese Terminology¹

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Introduction

In academia, manga surfaces most often under the umbrella of “Japanese popular culture.”² Outside of Japan mainly examined within the disciplinary framework of Japanese Studies, this type of graphic narrative (to use a narrow definition) has a lot in common with its anglophone, francophone, Italian and Spanish relatives. Research on graphic narratives in these languages emerged from the respective philological departments – at least until the institutionalization of Comics Studies. In order to join global “comics,” aesthetic rather than cultural properties of graphic narratives have been foregrounded. National particularization has also been sidestepped while cherishing cultural situatedness as well as language skills.

For manga, it is not easy to navigate these boundaries. Exclusivity abounds, whether self-chosen or imposed by others. Symptomatic of this exclusivity is the very word “manga” in English (and other Western languages): even if a Japanese publication uses it in a transcultural sense, translations culturalize, rendering “manga” uniformly as manga and implying “Japaneseness” thereby.³ Conversely, non-Japanese artists whose page layouts look mangaesque refrain from calling themselves *mangaka*.

“Japanese popular culture” consists of three elements, and the first element has, naturally, attracted the bulk of attention in Japanese Studies so

1 This article is a largely revised version of Jaqueline Berndt, “Manga wa ‘taishū bunka’ na no ka? Kaigai de no Nihon kenkyū ni okeru manga no ichizuke o megutte,” in *Die Aufgabe der Japanologie: Beiträge zur kritischen Japanforschung*, ed. Dorothea Mladenova, et al., (Leipzig: Leipziger University Press, 2022), 303–320.

2 See for example *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, (New York, London: Routledge, 2017. Kindl).

3 See, for example, Natsume Fusanosuke, “The Functions of Panels (*koma*) in Manga,” transl. Jon Holt and Teppei Fukuda, *ejcjs* (*electronic journal of contemporary Japanese studies*), 21.2. (2021).
http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol21/iss2/holt_fukuda.html?fbclid=IwAR378HVAudeH99DMdM0v832Em-Z5Hee2aBpGM6sxD8Lg2Fkfsyy4G-d8BDU

far. This attention has been informed mainly by Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Political Science, and the like (in line with the inclination to equate Japanese Studies with social sciences, observable in English and German publications rather than, for example, Italian or French).⁴ As a consequence, manga is often expected to serve “wider” social issues. The focus is either on representation, that is, how manga narratives illustrate gender roles, historical consciousness, youth nationalism, and disaster-related trauma, or on industrial issues, in particular transmedia franchises and the corresponding fan work. Although different, the two foci equally undervalue the media-specific characteristics of manga itself. This shows, for example, in the lumping together of manga and anime.⁵

As distinct from the high degree of awareness exercised concerning “Japan,” the term “popular culture” tends to be used as if it were self-evident. But its historical transformation, as well as the discrepancies between English and Japanese discourse affect the place assigned to manga in Japanese Studies. What is now called “popular culture” in English traces back to *taishū bunka* in Japanese. This word, however, was initially ~~been~~ the name for “mass culture.”⁶ According to Yoshida Hiroshi, a philosopher and leading expert in game studies, “[the English terms] ‘mass culture’ and ‘popular culture’ are often translated into Japanese indiscriminately as *taishū bunka*, but ‘mass’ and ‘popular’ have different connotations.”⁷ The meaning of “popular” is broader; it conjoins quantitative and qualitative aspects, implies the concurrence of consumerism and resistance, and concedes the possibility of agency to ordinary people. In the 1990s, anthropologists found such meanings in *minshū bunka* [lit. people’s culture] and used it as the antonym

4 Representative of this trend is *Studying Japan: Handbook of Research Designs, Fieldwork and Methods*, ed. Nora Kottmann and Cornelia Reiher (Baden-Baden: Nomo, 2020).

5 See for example *Manga anime de ronbun, repōto o kaku: “suki” o gakumon ni suru hōhō* [Writing articles and reports on manga/anime: Ways to turn “your passion” into scholarship], ed. Yamada Shōji, (Kyoto: Minerva, 2017).

6 For an early account based on Japanese-language discourse see Jaqueline Berndt, *Manga no kuni Nippon: Nihon no taishū bunka, shikaku bunka no kanōsei*, transl. Satō Kazuo and Mizuno Kazuhiko, (Tokyo: Kadensha, 1994, 2nd edition 2007).

7 Yoshida Hiroshi, “Popyurā karuchā to bigaku,” in *Bigaku no jiten*, ed. The Japan Society of Aesthetics, (Tokyo: Maruzen, 2020), 544. All translations from Japanese are mine. In the text body of this article, author names of Japanese-language publications are indicated in the Japanese name order (surname preceding first name without separation by comma), whereas the names of Japanese authors of English-language publications appear in the Western order.

of *taishū bunka*.⁸ But since then, loanwords have gained currency to mark the difference, namely, *poppyurā karuchā* and *poppyurā bunka* [popular culture]. They present a feasible option due to the unique writing system of the Japanese language; Korean and Chinese have to make do with terms such as “two-dimensional culture” (Jp. *nijigen bunka*), and “ACG [animation, comics, games] culture” (Jp. *ACG bunka*) instead.⁹ Yet, what complicates the situation in Japanese is not so much the relationship between “mass culture” and “popular culture” anymore, but rather their replacement with “subculture” (*sabukaruchā*). This dates back to the mid-1980s when the advertising agencies Hakuhodo and Dentsu¹⁰ proclaimed the “end of the masses” and promoted buzzwords like *bunshū* (fragmented masses) for a while. Japanese-Studies scholarship continues to lack awareness of this peculiar shift in Japanese discourse.¹¹

Against this backdrop, the first half of my article will survey what Japanese Studies has covered under the name of “mass/popular culture” (*taishū bunka*) and examine which issues have been brought to the fore by means of “subculture.” I will privilege publications in English and contrast them to Japanese research within the bounds of possibility. The second half will shift the focus to manga and question its framing as popular culture, presupposing a basic knowledge of manga as a culture and industry on the reader’s part. The ultimate aim is to raise awareness of terminology about the specific situatedness of Japanese terms, as well as intercultural discrepancies which are easily obscured by assuming the universal validity

8 For example, Marilyn Ivy, “Formations of Mass Culture,” in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 241; and Jennifer Robertson (1998), cited in Daniel White, *Administering Affect: Pop-Culture Japan and the Politics of Anxiety* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 195. For a detailed historical analysis of Japanese discursive terms, see Hideaki Fujiki, *Making Audiences: A Social History of Japanese Cinema and Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). This study is informed by an interest in social subjects and foregrounds cinema audiences; it does not look into “popular culture” or “subculture,” excludes “animated film” and does not list “manga” in the Index.

9 See the name of the *Taiwan Association for ACG Studies*, founded in 2022. The “two-dimensional” refers not so much to pictorial properties, but rather to the fictitious reality of manga and anime as distinct from “real life.”

10 Romanized proper names, as well as widely familiar place names, are indicated without macrons.

11 “Subculture” surfaces repeatedly, for example, in the text body of Daniel White, *Administering Affect*, where bureaucrats’ decision-making on Cool Japan policies is described, but it does not appear in the Index.

of American-based concepts; and also about historical change, in particular with regard to collectives and their media environments.

“Popular/Mass Culture”: Uniformity, Collectivity

Academic publications on “Japanese popular culture” in English date back to the late 1990s. Mikhail Koulikov, a specialist in social informatics, as well as anime and manga research, cites Katō Hidetoshi (1959) as the earliest example, but it is hard to say that Katō’s work in mass communication contributed significantly to the formation of Japanese Popular Culture as a research field affecting manga (and anime) studies.¹² In contrast to the English editions, none of Katō’s Japanese-language books have the word popular (or mass) culture in the title. This may indicate an intercultural gap between Japan and the US related to the time lag in the evolution of postwar “mass society.”

A pioneering publication that left a trace was the collection *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* (1996) edited by John W. Treat, a specialist in modern Japanese literature. In the introduction, Treat defined popular culture not as primarily concerned with leisure activities, entertainment, or mass communication, but in line with a notion of culture informed by Cultural Studies as, “Japan’s collectively experienced ‘everyday life’ [...] fluid symbolic systems and practices that enable groups to make various kinds of sense of their lives today.”¹³ The volume’s chapters explored advertising, fashion, and TV drama, music by artists as different as Misora Hibari and Sakamoto Ryūichi, the literary authors Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana, the initial *Godzilla* movie (1954) and the animated movie *AKIRA* (1988). Most examples were “commodified and therefore ‘mass,’”¹⁴ as the introduction explained the appearance of the word *mass culture* in several chapter titles. The main focus, however, was neither on the political agendas nor the collectivism historically associated with *mass culture* (*taishū bunka*), but rather on Japan’s cultural modernity in everyday life (*seikatsu*). Consequently, Yanagita Kunio, Gonda Yasunosuke, Kon Wajirō, and Ōya Sōichi were invoked as representative researchers of Japanese popular culture, and their diverse fields, ranging from folklore and traditions of multi-

12 Mikhail Koulikov, “A Field in Formation—A Citation Analysis of Japanese Popular Culture Studies,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 20.2 (2020): 270.

13 John Wh. Treat, “Introduction: Japanese Studies into Cultural Studies,” in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, ed. id., (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), 2.

14 Treat, Introduction, 1.

modal storytelling to mass media and the modern metropolis – that is, from folk culture (*minzoku bunka*) to mass culture (*taishū bunka*) and subculture (*ka'i bunka*, or *sabukaruchā*) – were conjoined under the name of *popular culture*. More than two decades later, sociologists Inoue Satoshi and Itō Kimio took a similar approach in their edited volume on *Popyurā bunka* [Popular Culture], where they added Satō Tadao, Tada Michitarō, and Tsurumi Shunsuke to the group of authors mentioned by Treat, in a section on “Nihon no popyurā bunka-ron” (Theories of Japan’s popular culture).¹⁵

It also bears mentioning that the title of Tsurumi’s seminal work *Sengo Nihon no taishū bunkashi 1945–1980* was translated into English as *A Cultural History of Postwar Japan 1945–1980*, circumventing the recurrent terminological issue of how to translate *taishū bunka* into English.¹⁶ In his monograph, Tsurumi pursued the change of values in society through mass, or popular, literature (*taishū bungaku*), manga, pop songs (*enka*), and comedic stage performances (*taishū geinō*) like *manzai* and *rakugo*. Thus, he considered forms that rested on centralized media corporations such as TV stations and major publishing houses, as well as venues that interrelated creators and recipients in a more immediate fashion, for example, shrine festivals (*matsuri*) or rental comics shops (*kashihon'ya*). Manga narratives for adult readers called *gekiga* were linked by Tsurumi to the latter, as a kind of modernized folk culture.¹⁷

In contrast, Australia-based sociologist Yoshio Sugimoto categorized manga as mass culture in the chapter “Popular Culture and Everyday Life” of his book *Introduction to Japanese Society*.¹⁸ According to him, popular culture consists of three forms that can be practiced by the same person: first, commercialized, escapist, and mass-media-based “mass culture” ranging from manga to pachinko parlors and love hotels; second, “folk culture” practiced by local communities and tied to their collective memory; and third, “alternative culture” as it manifested [in 1960s](#) underground art and in

15 Inoue Satoshi, and Itō Kimio, eds, *Popyurā bunka*, (Kyoto: Sekai shisōsha, 2009), 167–228.

16 See, for example, David Buist (2006, 367) who translates *taishū bunka* in the context of pre-war commercialization as ‘popular culture.’

17 The word *gekiga* (lit. dramatic pictures) refers to a type of graphic narrative for mature readers that formed the basis for *seinen* [youth] manga in the 1960s and 1970s. Non-Japanese comics critics occasionally assume it to be the only socio-critical manga genre, that is, an equivalent to “alternative comics.”

18 Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 220–244.

the 1980s took the form of street performances, *bōsōzoku* [motorcycle ‘tribes’] and environment-conscious cooperatives, new religions, civic movements, and *yakuza*. Sugimoto’s attempt at differentiation may be seen as a response to the decline of Japan’s mass society, in the course of which the word *taishū bunka* disappeared from book titles to make room for “popular culture” (*poppyurā bunka*, or *poppyurā karuchā*).

Informed by social-scientific interests similar to Sugimoto’s, a second pioneering anthology appeared in 1998 – *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*. Its editor, anthropologist Dolores Martinez, maintained that “we can have a popular culture of the Japanese nation which also reflects the diversity of Japanese society at a given moment,”¹⁹ highlighting diversity mainly with respect to male and female domains. Proceeding from the assumption that the culture of the modern nation-state is constructed not only from above but also below, she defined the “below,” that is, popular culture, as “culture consumed, and consumed in various ways, by different people,”²⁰ and “the best possible means through which to examine the process that is often called ‘national culture’.”²¹

Today, the volume’s topics – ranging from women’s magazines, NHK morning drama, and *karaoke* to horse-racing, *sumō* wrestling, and soccer – do not necessarily surface under the heading of Japanese popular culture anymore, but one trait exhibited by the introduction persists, that is, the inclination to nationalize. This does not apply exclusively to Japan (which could then be complemented by a geopolitical extension to, for example, East Asia); it also pertains to a generalization of audiences segmented only with regard to gender, and a preference for nation-wide mass-cultural “contents” (to use another Japanese Anglicism) obviously modeled on prime-time TV programs of the pre-digital era, such as the NHK new year’s eve show *Kōhaku uta gassen*.²² The underlying orientation is reminiscent of the “middle-mass society” (that is, the self-identification of Japan’s majority

¹⁹ Dolores Martinez, “Introduction,” in *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. id., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2–3.

²⁰ Martinez, Introduction, 2.

²¹ Martinez, Introduction, 14.

²² For the association of postwar Japan’s “mass culture” with the medium of television, see also literary scholar Oshino Takeshi’s introduction to *Nihon sabukaruchā o yomu: Ginga tetsudō kara AKB48 made*, ed. id., (Sapporo: Hokkaidō daigaku shuppankai, 2015).

as being middle-class around 1990)²³ and the perceived uniformity in consumerism, exemplified in manga, among other things, by the 1980s mega-hits of the magazine *Shōnen Jump*.

Clearly, the perspective of popular culture is inclined to prioritize “the culture of everyone”²⁴ and “felt collectivity,”²⁵ which by inclination becomes national culture. Both “mass culture,” premising a large quantity of more or less passive consumers, and “popular culture,” a Cultural-Studies concept that is eventually aimed at the agency and empowerment of users and specifies the former’s quantity (“popular with whom?”), are concepts that imply a preference for uniting capacities, even if conceding the existence of differences within. It is precisely this characteristic that hampers direct applicability to manga, as I will demonstrate in the second part of this article. But before that, a brief look at the relationship of “mass culture” to “subculture” – or of the “masses” to the “crowd” rather than “communities” – is in order.²⁶

The term *taishū bunka* is not entirely obsolete. Manga critic Ōtsuka Eiji has reclaimed it recently for a project he headed as a professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto (*Nichibunken*). One of the resulting publications is the edited volume *Nihon taishū bunkashi* [A History of Japanese Mass Culture] (2020). Here, Ōtsuka utilizes the older term in three ways: first, to voice skepticism about nationalizing the participants in popular culture; second, to reinstate the importance of historical investigation beyond the modern era; and third, to deprive the otaku subculture of the central position it has occupied in recent studies of Japanese popular culture. Regarding the first aspect, Ōtsuka brings into focus “not ‘the Japanese’ but someone universal, namely, the ‘masses’.”²⁷ In a way that is reminiscent of Tsurumi’s *A Cultural History of Postwar Japan 1945–1980*, he understands the masses less as passive “recipients of culture” mobilized by propaganda, marketing, or television, but rather as the “authors (*saku-*

²³ Ivy, *Formations of Mass Culture*, 241.

²⁴ Katakami Heijirō, “*Popyurā karuchā*” ron kōgi: *jidai ishiki no shakaigaku* (Kyoto: Shōyō shobō, 2017).

²⁵ Stacy Takacs, *Interrogating Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 16.

²⁶ Due to the decidedly contemporary perspective applied in this article, historic uses of the “crowd,” for example, in mass society theory, are not taken in consideration (on the latter see Fujiki, *Making Audiences*, 293).

²⁷ Ōtsuka Eiji, “Jo: *Nihon taishū bunkashi wa kanō na no ka*,” in *Nihon taishū bunkashi*, ed. Nichibunken taishū bunka kenkyū purojekuto (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 2020), 12.

sha) of culture.” The book’s cover design supports this orientation. Colored in red and white (and as such not far from associating “Japaneseness”), it presents in its lower half ink-brush drawings of three frogs, a *kappa* [water imp], and an *oni* goblin. At first glance these, may be mistaken to come from the medieval scrolls of *Frolicking Animals* (*Chōjū Giga*), the alleged progenitor of modern manga, but are actually cuts from an Edo-period scroll featuring supernatural beings (*Yōkai emaki*). This imagery is accompanied by a sentence that Ōtsuka apparently borrowed from folklorist Yanagita Kunio to oppose modern individualism: “the masses are the author” (*taishū to wa mure toshite no sakusha de aru*). The modifier of the masses – *mure* – poses a problem for translation here. I am reluctant to take it as “collective.” In consideration of how the “masses” as both a phenomenon and a concept have changed over the course of the last decades, I translate it here as “crowd” with its timely connotations, even if this undermines Ōtsuka’s intentions. After all, the large-scale, homogenous collective body called the masses has disintegrated into multitudinous subcultures that interconnect internally and externally in heterogeneous ways. Modern “collective” memory resting on national literature and cinema, television programs, or manga bestsellers has recently shifted towards “connective” memory based on social media; eye-catching groups of people in post-3.11 Japan (or Brexit-ing UK, for that matter) have often appeared less as politically effective “authors” of society and culture, but rather as participants in affective currents and virtual communities, whether casual or committed. Seen from a contemporary perspective, the term *taishū bunka* conjures up connotations of times past, at once foregrounding the importance of historical confirmation and appearing slightly anachronistic.

Ōtsuka’s emphasis on retrospection in the name of *taishū* [the masses] relates to the fact that academic research on “Japanese popular culture” has focused immensely on otaku geeks invested in the “two-dimensional” realities provided by manga, anime, video games, and so on. Arguably the earliest attempt at conceptualization was *Otakugaku nyūmon* [Introduction to Otaku-ology] (1996) by critic Okada Toshio.²⁸ For this monograph, Okada created a chart on the otaku evolution that squeezed the period between the “black ships” (1853/54) and the “defeat” in World War Two (1945) into the word “severance” (*danzetsu*) placed in solid black, thereby obscuring

²⁸ For an English extract see Okada Toshio, “Introduction to Otakuology (1996),” trans. Keiko Nishimura and introduced by Patrick W. Galbraith, in *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 89–104.

both imperialism and militarism.²⁹ In contrast, Ōtsuka has made many efforts to demonstrate that today's otaku culture originated precisely from that black hole, or more specifically war-time Japan. In addition, it is noteworthy that Okada omits the terms “mass culture” and “popular culture” altogether, highlighting instead the opposition between Orient and Occident, and between “main culture” and “subculture” within the latter. The Western-style *sabukaruchā* which he finds in 1990s Japan is characterized by a lifestyle orientation and slightly countercultural attitude as opposed to otaku culture that emerged as an extension of post-war children's culture. This categorization clearly reflects the Japanese wording of the 1990s.³⁰

The buzzword *sabukaruchā*, pejoratively also *sabukaru*, was spread in popular discourse by otaku representatives like Okada to distinguish their own taste, or knowledge, community from others. Bureaucrats, as well as academics, have utilized the term in place of popular culture to accommodate the changes caused by a new media environment rather than the initial concept developed by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies.³¹ Tsurumi and others³² addressed manga (or more specifically, *gekiga*) in the 1960s as a field of sociopolitical, even countercultural resistance, but since the 1990s “the subcultural texts of manga, anime and light novel” have only rarely seen direct links to social alterity, or marginalization.³³ In contrast, sex trade, crimes, nuclear nomads, and *yakuza* have been addressed under the name of subculture in English-language Japanese Studies, while igno-

29 Okada Toshio, *Otakugaku nyūmon*, (Tokyo: Ōta shuppan, 1996), 230.

30 Already in 1991, the journal *SPA!* published a respective special issue, according to Kanose Mitomo, and Barbora, eds, Sōtokushū “Otaku vs. *sabukaruchā* 1991–2005 *popukaruchā zenshi*,” *Eureka* 37–9 (2005).

31 See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (London: Routledge, 1988; first edition 1979); Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, eds, *The subcultures reader* (London: Routledge, 2005, 1st edition 1997).

32 For example, Ozaki Hideki who launched the journal *Taishū bungaku kenkyū* (Studies of Mass/Popular Literature) in 1961, or Ishiko Junzō who was at the center of the self-published journal for manga critique *Mangashugi* (Manga-ism, 1967–1978), as discussed, for example, in Oshino Takeshi, *Nihon sabukaruchā o yomu*, 2015.

33 Ōhashi Takayuki, “Janru no hen'yō to ‘kōji misuteri’ no ichi: Raito bungei kara mita gendai no shōsetsu to hihyō,” in *Bungaku kenkyū kara gendai Nihon no hihyō o kangaeru: Hihyō, shōsetsu, poppu karuchā o megutte*, ed. Nishitaya Hiroshi, (Tokyo: Hitsuji shobō, 2017), 290.

See also Narumi Hiroshi, “Sabukaruchā,” in *Chi no kyōkasho: karuchuraru sutadīzu*, edited by Yoshimi Shun'ya, (Tokyo: Koodansha, 2001), 97–120.

ring Japanese-language public discourse. Symptomatic in this regard is the *Japan Subculture Research Center*,³⁴ headed by Jake Adelstein as editor-in-chief, who sided with the controversial revision of the Tokyo Metropolitan Ordinance Regarding the Healthy Development of Youths in 2010 – against representatives of Japan’s “subculture,” i.e., prominent manga artists such as Nagai Gō, Satonaka Machiko and Takemiya Keiko.

English-language research on Japanese popular culture has foregrounded the media use of youths and, in particular, fans, against a backdrop of not only sociology but also of literary studies.³⁵ Propositions by Japanese literary scholars have largely gone unnoticed. One of them, Oshino Takeshi, suggests to historically distinguish “subculture” from both high culture (*kōshō bunka*) and popular culture, but he also sees modern boundaries disappearing: “subculture becomes culture, and culture becomes subculture.”³⁶ While he foregrounds scale here (resembling massive circulation), sociologist Katakami Heijirō highlights a widely shared sense of community that differs from modern “collectivity”: “Once there was a time when ‘everyone’s’ ‘popular culture’ existed. ‘Everyone’ was excited about the ‘Olympics,’ ‘hot-blooded (*nekketsu*) stories,’ ‘teen fiction,’ and the ‘idol culture’ of the 1980s.”³⁷ According to him, this popular culture saw a revival after the Triple Disaster of 2011 but in the form of nostalgic referencing, enabled by the experience of interconnecting via the same cultural “database”³⁸ – “the increased exposure to different cultures includes the possibility of referencing ‘everyone’s culture’ whenever necessary.”³⁹

As demonstrated above, in Japanese-language discourse the focus has shifted from the modernist opposition of “popular culture vs. high culture” to “popular culture and subculture” as a pair with changing emphases. Non-Japanese academic attempts at dissociating the study of Japanese popular culture from fan criticism are symptomatic of the ongoing nego-

34 Founded in 2007. <http://www.japansubculture.com/>

35 See, for example, Chida Hiroyuki, *Poppu karuchā no shisōken: bungaku to no setsuzoku kanōsei aruiwa fukanōsei* (Tokyo: Ohfu, 2013); Nishitaya Hiroshi, *Fantaji no ideorōji: gendai Nihon anime kenkyū*, (Tokyo: Hitsuji shobō, 2014).

36 Oshino Takeshi, *Nihon sabukaruchā o yomu*, 2015, 16.

37 Katakami Heijirō, “Popyurā karuchā” ron kōgi, 250.

38 The use of the word *database* leans on Azuma Hiroki, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

39 Katakami Heijirō, “Popyurā karuchā” ron kōgi, 254.

tiations between “subculture” on the one hand, and popular as “main culture” on the other.

Manga: Segmentation, Connectivity

As is clear from the above, the concept of popular culture is highly contingent; it gains substance primarily in juxtaposition to what it is not. In postwar Japan, “popular culture” had been conceived as modern in contrast to traditional folk culture on the one hand, and as commercialized, that is, economically heteronomous, culture in opposition to allegedly “autonomous” highbrow art and scholarship on the other hand. Given this double configuration, Tsurumi Shunsuke classified manga as “liminal art” (*genkai geijutsu*).⁴⁰ Set against both “pure art” (*junsui geijutsu*) that interrelates well-trained professionals with connoisseurs and “mass art” (*taishū geijutsu*) that leans on supplies by media specialists to a general audience, “liminal art” conjoined amateurs in a mutually replaceable fashion.⁴¹ It is important to note that Tsurumi did, “not attempt to juxtapose manga schematically as a counterculture versus the so-called mainstream culture – he regarded manga as something liminal that exists on the very boundary of the two, and cannot be fitted into that dichotomy.”⁴²

Tsurumi’s characterization of manga as “liminal art” may appear plausible from a historical perspective – after all, the industry was still in its formative phase, and the relationship between artists and readers was not that highly mediated yet, as, for example, the case of rental comics (*kashihon manga*) indicates. But even back then, the two dispositions of “pure art” and “mass art” were not only external to manga culture, they recurred internally. Suffice it to think of the magazines *Monthly Garo* (launched in 1964) and *Shōnen Jump* (launched in 1968) as representatives of what Japanese manga critics have called *mainā* (“minor” in the sense of alternative, independent, experimental comics) and *mējā* (“major” in the sense of corporate mainstream or mass culture). Experts agree that the aesthetically as well as commercially productive interplay between the two positions

⁴⁰ Rendered as “marginal art [...] at the threshold of [...] mainstream culture” by Fujiki (*Making Audiences*, 293) without consideration of previous translations.

⁴¹ Tsurumi Shunsuke, *Genkai geijutsuron* (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 1967).

⁴² Saika Tadaihiro, “Tsurumi Shunsuke *Sengo Nihon no taishū bunkashi 1945–1980*,” in *Manga sutadizu*, ed. Yoshimura Kazuma and Jaqueline Berndt (Kyoto: Jinbun shoin, 2020), 42–43.

ended around 1989.⁴³ It is, however, also questionable to what extent “major” and “minor” productions were at odds with each other in the first place. In addition to the commercial scale (print-runs, size of publisher, etc.), differences in narrative and visual style are often cited to distinguish the two. But “minor” artists have not necessarily avoided major publishers, and they have not necessarily been averse to getting their works distributed to the largest possible number of readers, and to earn a living from that.

At almost the same time as dichotomous categorization shrank in importance domestically, it returned for manga abroad: manga’s domestication in European and North American markets took the form of polarization between the corporate mainstream, exemplified by *Jump* series targeted to teenagers and inviting fannish participation, on the one end of the spectrum, and *gekiga* marketed to an older demographic of comics aficionados and readers of “graphic novels” on the opposite end.⁴⁴ A third type of graphic narrative, located in between the two counterpoles, has seen an advance in translated editions recently. It consists mainly of *seinen* [youth] and *josei* [women’s] manga that attract readers with their narratives rather than affectively charged *moe* characters and a “database” of familiar components. Incidentally, this is the type of manga that also crosses the main domestic divide, namely, that of the gendered genres. It has played a central role in the Media Arts Awards, run by Japan’s Agency for Cultural Affairs 1997–2022. Whereas the section dedicated to animation has often seen tensions between the factions of TV anime series and short films from the field of Art Animation, the manga section has been predominated by “mid-brow” productions in a way that seems to confirm the collapse of modern dichotomies mentioned above.

References to popular “art” (*popyurā geijutsu*) do still exist, as Yoshida Hiroshi demonstrates in his already-mentioned article for the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (2020). His article leans mainly on English-language theoreticians and does not mention Tsurumi at all which is, in part, due to the particularities of aesthetics (*bigaku*) as a discipline in modern Japan and its close institutional ties with art history and art theory. Equally relevant is the fact that English-language research on popular culture has been concerned with art (*geijutsu*) much more than its Japanese equivalent. Tsurumi

⁴³ Itō Gō, *Tezuka izu deddo: Hirakareta manga hyōgenron e* (Tokyo: NTT Publishing, 2005), 44.

⁴⁴ See, for example, the case study by Rebecca Suter, “Japan/America, Man/Woman: Gender and Identity Politics in Adrian Tomine and Yoshihiro Tatsumi,” *Paradoxa* 22 (2010): 101–122.

shifted his focus from “(liminal) art” to “(mass) culture” around the same time as the best-selling manga weekly *Shōnen Magazine* reached a print-run of more than one million copies per issue in the late 1960s.

Manga as mass or popular culture does not refer primarily to caricatures and comic strips that were closely linked to the public sphere of modern society, but rather to *story manga*, graphic fiction that originally evolved as entertainment for children. Comparable to television, especially its serial programs, manga narratives have kept readers hooked with both their content and their prices, and they were large enough in numbers to provide hundreds of artists with an opportunity to make a living. Aspects like these are easily overlooked when the one-way transmission of “contents” produced by media corporations comes to the fore in critical research, resulting from a notion of manga as mass culture opposite folk culture and (sociocritical) counterculture. This notion shows in Sugimoto’s introduction mentioned above, and also in a more recent article by literary scholar Treat who has become very skeptical. Contrary to the mid-1990s, he deplores the fact that ~~that~~ in contemporary Japanese studies courses “‘popular culture’ is largely only the highly capitalized, highly commodified parts of it. Anime and manga, easily imported to wherever we are, are deployed to stand in for the whole of pedagogic object ‘Japan.’”⁴⁵ From this point of view, manga appears as a childish medium that invites empathy only to fixate it in the realm of affect, a form of “mass art” that gives priority to uniform conventions over individual originality.

But even if manga appears mass-cultural in view of sales and stylistic standardization, this does not necessarily mean that the masses have consumed the same “contents.” The expansion of the manga market was achieved through drastic segmentation: age- and gender-specific demographics targeted through special magazines, and later book series, played the central role. While the magazine media heaped together graphic narratives from different sites and formats (non-specialized children’s periodicals and exclusive publications for rental stores, to name just two),⁴⁶ it also compartmentalized the readership into *shōnen* (boys) and *shōjo* (girls), followed in the 1970s by *seinen* (youth), and later *josei* (women). Accordingly, the magazine facilitated genre-specific narrative patterns and visual conventions, and furthermore the formation of quasi-virtual taste communities

⁴⁵ John Whittier Treat, “Japan is Interesting: Modern Japanese Literary Studies Today,” *Japan Forum*, 30.3 (2018): 427.

⁴⁶ See Yamamori Hiroshi, “*Komikkusu*” *no media-shi* (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2019).

that escaped the “masses” long before the birth of the Internet. Manga was able to mature as both an industry and a culture precisely because it had its base in proto-virtual communities that existed in between the “masses” and the individual. Encouraging readers to submit letters and drawings of their own, and to vote on the continuation of serials, the format of the magazine gave rise to participatory culture. This type of manga was as much subcultural as it was mass or popular cultural: massive as a whole, but highly segmented within.

Since the 1970s a new form of “minor” manga has been on the rise: *dōjinshi* (that is, fanzine-like self-published) manga. Once, professionalism was characteristic of “pure art,” or the “aesthetic disposition” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s wording), and “mass art,” or the “popular disposition,” but specialized expertise has become widely dispersed and closely intertwined with the penchant for sharing, as recent technology-savvy fan-cultures evince. This fusion has yielded a third, “imagination-oriented” disposition.⁴⁷ In a recent paper, Alexander Zahlten, who specializes in East Asian cinema, compares *dōjinshi* manga to Japan’s independent film.⁴⁸ According to him, both refrained from taking a political stance or leaning on commercialism (at least, historically), but they did not reject the corporate mainstream either. In other words, *dōjinshi* manga were similar to independent films insofar as they escape the modern Western dichotomies of “professional vs. amateur” and “heteronomy vs. autonomy.” Instead of asserting their own identity in relation to their counterpole (to what they are not), they have been characterized by an “intense desire for connectivity.”⁴⁹ This is remarkable interculturally as well as intermedially. One might wonder though, why independent film is compared with comics, but not *dōjin* activities utilizing the medium of anime, another video-based form of expression. In that case, differences rather than commonalities between indepen-

⁴⁷ This term was proposed by Zoltan Kacsuk, “From ‘Game-like Realism’ to the ‘Imagination-oriented Aesthetic’: Reconsidering Bourdieu’s Contribution to Fan Studies in the Light of Japanese Manga and Otaku Theory,” *Kritika Kultura*, 26 (2016): 274–292. <http://journals.ateneo.edu/ojs/kk/article/view/2264>

⁴⁸ *Dōjinshi* signifies publications by groups of “like-minded people” or peers (*dōjin*), and more specifically, fan-cultural publication produced and circulated outside of a corporate context: fan fiction, fan art, “fanzines” carrying mainly derivative and transformative creations.

⁴⁹ Alexander Zahlten, “Media models of ‘amateur’ film and manga,” in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Cinema*, ed. Joanne Bernardi and Shota T. Ogawa, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 163.

dent film and *dōjinshi* manga would come to the fore, for example, stylistic resemblances of the latter with the corporate mainstream in terms of professionalism – from character design to page layouts (and not only in derivative productions). An alternative to both *dōjinshi* manga and corporate manga is recent “essay manga” published on social media by casual readers who are neither professional artists nor *dōjinshi* creators (the latter not necessarily being “amateurs” anymore).

What, then, makes manga manga across genres and eras? Visual style is often assumed to ensure recognizability. But something that does not look mangaesque (concerning character design, linework, paneling, etc.) might nevertheless be acknowledged as “manga proper” because it meets criteria such as magazine serialization, franchising, and invitation to derivative creation, while something that looks mangaesque might not be acknowledged due to its unusual venue or purpose. It makes a significant difference for audiences whether a certain manga is entertaining fiction published by a media corporation to be sold, or informational material released by a state agency. The use of manga in *Robo Sapiens Japonicus: Robots, Gender, Family and the Nation* by anthropologist Jennifer Robertson provides an instructive example in this regard.

One of Robertson’s central examples is a 10-page informational comic in short-story format commissioned by the Japanese government in 2007.⁵⁰ It was not available in stores, and it lacks the very manga look that is expected to invite empathy – close-ups of characters’ faces to begin with. Regarding such a publication as “exemplary of the widespread use in Japan of *gekiga* (graphic propaganda)”⁵¹ is only possible if one abstains from considering the meaning of *gekiga* shared by the majority of manga authors, editors, and readers. The formalist reference to a “typical graphic structure”⁵² – panel types as categorized by cognitive linguist Neil Cohn – does not accommodate manga specificity either as it overlooks the situatedness that needs to be considered when assessing the possible socio-political impact of this highly compartmentalized popular media. After all, the allegedly universal “graphic structure” of manga differs significantly according to time and (gendered) genre. Cohn demonstrated “that Japanese manga

⁵⁰ Eguchi Katsuhiko (author) and Fujii Ryūji (art), *2025-nen Inobe-ke no ichinichi* (Tokyo: PHP, 2007).

⁵¹ Jennifer Robertson, *Robo Sapiens Japonicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 22.

⁵² Robertson, *Robo Sapiens Japonicus*, 74.

places a greater emphasis on the parts of a scene (through Monos, Micros, and Amorphics) than on the whole scene (Macros).⁵³ But this is just one part of what he calls Japanese Visual Language (JVL), a modular symbol system, highly consistent across artists and easy to share beyond national borders, and as such facilitating a mangaesque look which Robertson's example does not exhibit. Here, the limits of traditional formalism present themselves as a form of generalization that disregards segmentations – not only concerning the dichotomy of fine art vs. mass culture, but also historically and (sub-)culturally specific media practices, sites of publication, horizons of consumer expectation, and genre as an environment that supercedes individual works.

Coda

As demonstrated in this article, “popular culture” is one perspective on manga among many. Subsuming manga to “popular culture” brings commonalities to the fore which tend to focus on the scale of the nation and society at large. Manga, however, has been a domain of highly compartmentalized, or subcultural, practices, and these are not limited to consumption but manifest also in conventions, fanzine sales events, and social networks. The manga media is not as “mass-cultural” as TV dramas, anime, or popular music, not even in Japan. In retrospect, the question arises as to whether manga was “massive” in the first place. The answer depends, of course, on how we understand “popularity.” Not only the academic definition but also the general notion is changing. This was illustrated, for example, in Kyoto Seika University's Department of Popular Culture. Established in 2013 and strictly separated from the already existing Manga Department, it consisted of two programs for popular music and fashion respectively, but it was discontinued in March 2020 and replaced by a new Department for Media Expression (*media hyōgen gakubu*). This resonates with the discursive shifts described above: from mass culture and popular culture to subculture and, further on, media culture, from “collectivity” to “connectivity.” The point is not to slam one thing over the other, clinging to a binary logic of either/or, but rather to observe the emphases as they change according to place and time. Manga is as much “Japanese popular culture” as it is a transnational medium, and it is as much interconnected with other media as it retains media-specific particularity. Instead of seeking an essential answer to the question of whether or not manga is “popular cul-

⁵³ Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 161.

ture,” this article proposes to trace the conditions under which it makes sense to classify manga as such.

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