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Considering Manga Discourse

Location, Ambiguity, Historicity

JAQUELINE BERNDT

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In the past few years, manga has become quite popular as material for research and education about contemporary Japan. However, academic theses and papers often give the impression that while manga may serve as a mirror for various social and cultural discourses, neither the media-specific aspects of comics nor the Japanese discourse on comics need to be taken into account. This observation leads me to the discussion below.

As a starting point, I should like to note why I use the term “discourse.” The concept of discourse draws attention to both contesting views and the contingency of notions like “manga,” “tradition,” and “art”; in other words, this concept allows for considering the changing power relations and historic conditions that set the framework for what can be said about comics in a specific culture and what is widely affirmed as a typical manga at a certain point in time. From such a perspective, manga discourse is not limited to manga criticism; it also includes the ways in which social institutions—the mass media and the educational system, among others—define manga and its social relevance. Such definitions of “manga” are, of course, also indebted to the variety of manga readers and the works most widely shared. Therefore, the goal of this essay is to explicate what foreign students of manga are missing when they ignore Japanese secondary sources.

My call to consider Japanese manga discourse is addressed primarily to scholars with a command of the Japanese language and, in a broader sense, to all those who make public statements about manga. Of course, a lack of direct access to sources in Japanese (as is the case with many comics experts) or a lack of expertise in regard to the comics medium (as is the case with many Japanologists) does not necessarily diminish the importance of these authors’ writings. However, authors in both fields should be aware that their points of view are naturally limited and valuable precisely because they need broadening by others. A comics expert unfamiliar with Japan is expected to place manga in the context of his or her individual experiences with non-

Japanese comics rather than to provide an overall picture of manga history. A scholar of Japanese studies, on the other hand, is supposed to open up Japanese sources and voices to a non-Japanese audience. My own perspective is that of a German-born art scholar teaching in Japan, who has been observing Japanese manga discourse at close range for nearly two decades and is motivated by an interest in the aesthetics of comics.

The first section of this essay describes common methodological blind spots in writings on manga (and to some extent, anime), paying special attention to the field of Japanese studies. It illuminates the way in which authors often neglect the aesthetic and cultural ambiguity of manga, which comes in part from a tendency to overlook Japanese manga discourse. The second section provides a brief historical survey, focusing on recent tendencies to critically question the primacy of the so-called story-manga as allegedly originated and developed by Osamu Tezuka. The third and final section analyzes inclinations in manga discourse to trace manga back to a purely Japanese premodern pictorial art. The emphasis here lies on contesting views within Japanese manga discourse and on the historical ambiguity inherent in manga.

Blind Spots in the Study of Manga

In view of manga's contemporary prevalence, it does not come as a surprise that it also serves as a subject of academic study. In Japanese studies programs, both at select Japanese schools such as Ōsaka University and in other countries, manga (along with anime and other popular media) has increasingly become a topic of study with regard to issues such as gender, global media culture, neonationalism, and dystopian images of the future (Bachmayer 1986, 1997; Guden 1998; Phillipps 1996, 2000). However, an overview of the status quo reveals some striking issues with regard to how authors situate themselves in relation to Japan, to comics in general, and to Japanese comics in particular.

First, how manga is treated depends highly on the cultural context of the researcher and intended audience. Non-Japanese publications, particularly academic ones, are generally not read by Japanese manga creators, editors, and readers.¹ The majority of them do not have any command of foreign languages and, until recently, have not been much interested in areas other than their domestic markets. Therefore, publications in languages other than Japanese are specifically addressed to a non-Japanese audience, and their authors' inclination to "universal readings" may lead to serious shortcomings, yet this is rarely considered. Even those authors with a background in Japanese studies often fail to explain why particular examples of manga or anime are discussed and why the Japanese public and experts consider them important (see, for example, Napier 2001).²

A typical example is the general critical commentary on Hayao Miyazaki. Non-Japanese scholars tend to assume that his movies are typical of anime as a whole because of their mere presence in Japan; they frequently treat these animated movies as mirrors of Japanese culture, assuming the existence of a homogenous audience,

and often implicitly comparing them to Disney products, but they rarely locate them within the history and present variety of animation in Japan.³ Equally symptomatic of a decidedly foreign approach is the astonishingly small emphasis on comparing animated movies (or series) with their respective manga works, even in the case of *Nausicäa of the Valley of the Wind* or *Ghost in the Shell*. This arises from different ways of experiencing the works in the first place, but it also involves a widespread disregard for Japanese perspectives. Such perspectives are vital, however, as they call to mind that neither manga nor anime is consumed by an “average Japanese recipient.” Both genres have long targeted specific ages, genders, and tastes,⁴ and today the vast number of works produced ensures that even dedicated fans are not able to gain an overall view. Publications by Japanese manga and anime researchers allow glimpses into ways of consumption that otherwise could only be gained through painstaking audience research (Hosogaya 2002).

Foreign scholars also tend to concentrate on thematic interpretations of manga and anime. However, considering how they are consumed in Japan would shift the emphasis of criticism in this area. Without this context, authors may overlook that genres *within* manga are less centered on thematic content than in the United States and, furthermore, that many regular readers today are less attracted by narrative content than by technical craftsmanship, visual spectacle, intertextual references, or cute characters. To rephrase it, whereas scholars attempt to locate a certain work within their own cultural or social milieu, fans prefer to remain within the limited realm of their specific media culture. What should distinguish scholarly academic research from fan expertise (and thus justify such endeavors) is to acknowledge the existence of multiple readings and mediate between them. However, to do so effectively, scholars need to be open to the nonacademic field of expertise (like that of fan-expert knowledge) as well as to Japanese discourse on the subject.

The external or non-Japanese perspective discussed above includes, secondly, manga's being regarded as an “outsider” to comics. Students of manga within Japanese studies usually do not attempt comparisons with other sorts of comics or consult theoretical literature by authors not specializing in Japan who publish in periodicals like the *Comics Journal* and the *International Journal of Comic Art*.⁵ This segregation between manga and the “rest” of comics can be traced back to two completely different motivations. In some circumstances, it comes from an exclusive interest in things Japanese, without a significant exposure to comics and their specific discourse; at other times, its genesis is the enthusiasm of manga fans, who usually refrain from consuming any other sorts of comics. As opposite as these positions seem, both focus on manga as a peculiarly Japanese cultural artifact and therefore tend to reinforce exoticism and neonationalism. However, instead of engaging the issue of “Japaneseness,” I prefer to draw attention to the lack of familiarity with comics as a whole, including the range of variations within the medium. This lack is perhaps one reason why Japanologists often neglect manga's aesthetic and cultural particularities. But without considering comics on their own terms, it will not be possible to examine multiple perspectives on them. Yet, manga call for multiple perspectives in the form of considering Japanese as well

as non-Japanese views of them, and also, in the form of a methodological vacillation between the realm of representational contents and that of its specific renderings. An examination of “adult manga,” for example, cannot be limited just to an investigation of adult subject matter and themes, but equally has to question what adult forms of manga expression and reading would be and to whom.

Before proceeding with this discussion, I need to clarify briefly how comics are defined. In general, contemporary scholars, curators, and publicists hold two opposing ideas about comics. On the one hand, comics are seen as a comforting medium of simplification and redundancy that reduces complexities (Clark 2003). Contrarily, comics are also viewed as a highly challenging medium that unites the seemingly incompatible, for example, the acts of reading and watching (Frahm 2000). The first view is often taken by persons who have just “discovered” comics. Even if they do not mean to disparage the medium, they tend to treat it prejudicially by relying upon a procrustean bed of binary oppositions to which they cling. This oppositional framework reveals itself, for example, by their dichotomizing of a desired authenticity of hand-drawn lines with the impersonal-looking products of the culture industry, assessing of works in regard to what they understand as “escapism” versus “realism,” and distinguishing between “children’s” and “adult” comics. Foreign comics experts, by contrast, dismiss those who would denigrate the medium by emphasizing its complexity, and they often regard the fact that comics ask their readers to read and view at the same time as suggestive of their fundamentally avant-garde potential. However, they, too, have their limitations insofar as they overlook the fact that experienced comics readers have no trouble reading and viewing simultaneously. Nevertheless, focusing on comics’ incompatibility and ambiguity appears to be crucial in discussing comics, including the aesthetic particularities of the medium.

An inexperienced person might easily capitulate to comics’ blurring of verbal and pictorial elements, where pictorial signs function like language and verbal signs assume pictorial qualities. Comics also make readers shift their attention between sequential panels that suggest temporal succession and (double) pages, which present these parts simultaneously. This invites consideration of issues such as narrative progression and repetition, analysis and synthesis of movement, invention and confirmation, the serious and the funny, and last but not least, the materiality and representationality of symbols. Indeed, it may be noted that symbols in recent comics do not necessarily symbolize anything. While signs in mainstream comics often appear transparent, that does not necessarily mean that they should be “read” as having specific meanings; for example, words in a speech balloon may merely indicate the presence of a speaker. This ambiguous status of words in comics may make content-centered interpretations appear arbitrary. In order to avoid that, the fundamental aesthetic ambiguity of comics must be taken seriously, and it should be acknowledged not only as a general affirmation of equivocalness and polyphony, but also as a structural characteristic of the methods used for analyzing this ambiguous medium. In the broadest sense, the issue of ambiguity highlights the dissolution of modernist concepts of identity. This dissolution is probably one factor among others in comics’ current popularity

and specifically in the exceptional interest in manga, which is the offspring of a non-Euroamerican modernization.

The fundamental characteristics found in the aesthetic ambiguity of comics also apply to its cultural hybridity. This leads me to my third point, a call to reflect upon manga as Japanese comics. Today, manga form one of the three main comics cultures of the world, along with American comics and Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*. Admittedly, only a few foreign comics are translated into Japanese, and even those that are available are not approved as “manga,” as has been the case with Hergé’s *Tintin* series, which has been marketed in Japan as children’s or picture books (*ehon*) carefully segregated from manga publishers and manga shelves. Yet, favoring a certain “manga style” shows ignorance of manga’s own history and its present variety. Unlike modern fine art or literature, comics in general have been a fundamentally impure, parasitic form of expression, borrowing more from existing sources than aiming at inventive modernist originality (Carrier 2000). Manga, in particular, has consistently appropriated such diverse pictorial sources as Chinese ink-painting, European tableau with its central perspective, European caricature, and American superhero comics. After World War II all this was mediated by photography and film. What is globally known today as “manga style” is, in fact, the result of intercultural exchange.

But hybridity is not only an issue that concerns foreign cultures; it also concerns various cultures within a single nation. With this in mind, it must be remarked that manga’s proliferation has given rise to an enormous contemporary range of expressions and readings. There are bestseller series appearing in major weeklies like *Shōnen jampū*—which themselves offer the choice between “throwaway products” and more solidly crafted works republished in book format—next to alternative comics in minor magazines like *AX*, and there is also a multitude of fan creations (*dōjinshi*). Still, Japan’s comics culture is not characterized by an opposition between radically alternative and unscrupulously commercial comics so much as by forms that hybridize various cultural levels and artists who publish at different locations. For example, what the French publisher Casterman is presenting under its label *sakka, l’autre manga* actually belongs not to the presumed category of European *auteurism* (*sakka shugi*), but to a third kind of comics, which is reader-friendly although not consumeristic, and challenging although not underground. Likewise, Casterman’s catchphrase “manga grows up” (*manga wa otona ni naru*) addresses values of European comics readers in order to promote a certain kind of manga. Still, it is difficult to apply the opposition of “infantile” and “adult” to Japanese comics; manga that are generically labeled *seinen* (youth) often address the “child inside the man,” while those for children take minors seriously and do not shy away from issues like sexuality and violence.

This raises the question of how specifically Japanese manga are. Without going into detail, I would like to point to an “economic Japaneseness” here, that is, manga as an extraordinarily successful culture industry. What distinguishes manga from other comics cultures is, above all, the crucial role of special magazines, which serialize comics before republishing them in book format, and their editors, who often produce and co-create manga series. This system of production, which has been evolving since

the late 1950s, has had many aesthetic and cultural consequences. Some of these include the evolution of multivolume entertaining graphic novels, the emergence of manga creators willing to serve their readers without aiming for the status of *auteur*, the formation of readers' communities centered around "their" magazines, and the evaluation of manga works in regard to their qualities of mediating relations. These are specifically Japanese aspects that derive from particular historic conditions, and they should lead one to realize that "manga" and "comic books" connote completely different cultures of publishing, distributing, and consuming comics.

The explanations above are meant to recommend an awareness of one's own location, the comics medium, and the issues specific to Japan; this will help avoid inconsistencies, or even the breakdown of traditions of scholarship in the face of a new topic like manga. The academic world is seemingly not yet at ease with manga, as shown by the situation in Japan.

Not even a decade ago, professors at Japanese universities still refused to supervise students who intended to graduate with a thesis on manga—some out of disdain for this topic, others out of an awareness of their own ignorance. Under these conditions, an academic symposium on manga, like that held during the annual conference of the Japan Society for Art History (Nihon Bijutsushi Gakkai) in May 1998, could become a milestone since this had never been possible before (Berndt 2001, 358). But a transformation in this field has taken place within a period of time that may be too short for historians to notice. Japan's academic world has become more open to manga, although often at the expense of scholarship, while nonacademic manga experts are simultaneously calling for more reliable data, multidisciplinary research, and basic knowledge of the history of manga discourse.

At universities—and at junior high schools as of April 2002—manga is often embraced in the spirit of a sheer populism (Berndt 2002). Educators use manga to bring their classes closer to daily life, but they do so without reflecting upon its ordinary context or unusually critical approaches to the medium. From a foreign perspective, the majority of Japanese publications on manga seem too journalistic and too insular to be of great help in European or American scholarship. Therefore, non-Japanese scholars gravitate toward books by university professors, especially if they carry the word *gaku* (study) in their titles. Yet, such publications are often less reliable than may be expected, because they take manga criticism as well as historical research on the topic very lightly.⁶ In addition, they rarely use their academic training and heritage to advocate approaches toward manga that might challenge established views. In other words, they do not attempt to mediate between different fields of knowledge. Japanese academics who are critical of the institutional context do discuss topics like manga, but all too often they merely play academism off against populism. This is evident from the slapdash way they frequently treat the topic, as though failing to exercise proper scholarly care were the same as a critique of academism.

The Nihon Manga Gakkai (Japan Society for Studies in Cartoon and Comics, JSSCC) is the most authoritative Japanese source of reliable data and thorough research. The society was founded in July 2001 after dispelling misgivings among

critics in regard to the possible monopolization of manga discourse by intellectuals and academics. At present, nonacademic manga critics and collectors—some of whom do occasionally teach at the university level—are a more influential group within the society than academics. A second important group in the JSSCC consists of M.A. and Ph.D. students from diverse academic disciplines; through the society, they gain an audience that is sympathetic to the application of research in areas such as sociology, media studies, and pedagogy to comics. Many of them show interest in methodological problems ranging from the contextual differences between reading, researching, and teaching manga (in other words, issues of location) to the actual possibilities for negotiating between manga studies and theories not related to either comics or Japan. Occasionally, differences between data-oriented research and theoretical endeavors cause friction, as do the differences between nonacademic and academic members. Especially in the case of manga, however, such friction should be welcomed as a kind of productive uncertainty. When properly harnessed, such uncertainty can motivate researchers to attempt a dialogue with people at home in other contexts and to translate between the various expert cultures. It can provoke researchers to cope with manga as an ambiguous medium—to let themselves get challenged by it as an academic subject—and to question their conventional criteria of quality assessment: What makes a “good” manga is quite different from a “good” novel or a “good” film. This productive uncertainty, which comes from the fundamental characteristics of comics, might benefit the study of other arts and media with which manga is often compared, but it should be intrinsic to the study of manga within Japanese studies in order to avoid the blind spots discussed above.

Tezuka and Beyond: Recapitulating Manga Criticism in Japan

If asked why manga is so popular today, many people in Japan would give one of the two standard answers: “because Japan had an Osamu Tezuka” or “because Japan has a long artistic tradition that dates back to *Chōjū giga*,” a monochrome handscroll work of the late twelfth century. I will focus on the latter in the third and final section of this chapter, but here I will use the former as my springboard into crucial issues of Japanese manga criticism.

Unlike the kind of manga that has been at the center of comics’ globalization for the last decade, the work of Osamu Tezuka (1928–1989) is not equally popular at home and abroad; yet, to most Japanese manga critics, he set the standard. In Japan, Tezuka is often called the “god of manga,” because of his achievements, starting in the late 1940s, in establishing story-manga, as distinct from one-panel cartoons and newspaper comic strips (*koma manga*). He influenced generations of manga creators and readers, including such critics and researchers as Osamu Takeuchi, originally a professor of children’s literature, and “manga columnist” Fusanosuke Natsume (Natsume 1992b, 1995; Takeuchi 1992, 1995). In their analysis, Tezuka’s comics for children appeared revolutionary because of their shift from didactics to entertainment, their establishment of long and exciting narratives, the efficient and complementary

intertwining of verbal and pictorial elements, and—most importantly—their use of allegedly cinematic techniques such as montage and varying shots and angles. Taking Tezuka, across all his stylistic transformations, as a model results in a *temporal* conceptualization of manga. Straightforward dramatic narratives about human or human-like protagonists are favored, and the pictorial elements serve as a language that is supposed to be “read.” This kind of manga is not to be assessed as a graphic art, but rather with regard to how well its graphic rendering advances the narrative. Since the story has become the main criterion for assessing “quality,” the author and his “work” are of more interest to the critics than multiple and creative readings.

This standard of story-manga fostered by Tezuka and developed by the so-called *gekiga* (a kind of comics addressed to older readers and closely tied to the rental libraries of the early 1960s) culminated in boys’ manga magazines with exceptionally high circulations, like *Shōnen jampū*. However, these have seen severe setbacks since the mid-1990s. Today’s children often become familiar with media such as anime and video or computer games before reading their first manga, and teenagers who regularly consume manga demonstrate an increasing indifference to the priority of the story and the traditional gender-specific genres. In view of this situation, Gō Itō published a book provocatively titled *Tezuka Is Dead (Tezuka izu deddo, 2005)*. Established critics had been complaining about the loss of manga’s previous attraction, but Itō countered that the carriers of this attraction have simply changed. He notes, for instance, that cute characters have taken over from dramatic stories and that multiple readings and applications of the texts—including appropriation and creative copying of the characters—have supplanted an author-centered and story-centered reading. Itō further claims that in order to understand this transformation, the Tezuka model must be relegated to history in two main respects.

The first issue Itō discusses is the modernity of Tezuka’s manga. In this respect, he highlights Tezuka’s reliance on artificial characters, such as robots, half-humans, and animals, which clearly do not exist outside the narrative. Readers are drawn into the story through their empathy for these characters, but at the same time that lure, which is fundamental to comics, is veiled by a modern realism and the autonomy of the characters.⁷ According to Itō, the ambiguity of comics characters, which vacillate between being just a bunch of strokes drawn on paper and giving the realistic impression of a human personality, has been suppressed not only by Tezuka, but also by those manga critics who took him as their standard.

In addition, there has been little discussion of the ambiguous status of the focal plane, that is, the plane of the picture that the reader focuses on visually in manga. Many Japanese comics provide the readers with an enjoyable uncertainty as to whether the single panel or the whole page is to be treated as the main visual frame; characters may clamber over panel frames, or full views of protagonists may appear right next to a succession of panels. It is precisely this ambiguity, which distinguishes comics from film, that was overlooked by manga critics when, around 1980, they began to praise Tezuka retrospectively for his “cinematic” style.

Itō's book is worthy of discussion from various angles, but it is not easily accessible to people unfamiliar with Japanese manga criticism. Its primary goal is to reflect upon the kind of manga that has been made the focus of critical attention and upon the methodological consequences of such choices. In particular, the emphasis on ambiguity as a characteristic peculiar to comics is innovative and stimulating. But Itō is not the first to foreground manga criticism. The first authoritative publications in the area appeared in the late 1980s (Kure 1986; Takeuchi and Murakami 1989), and since then it has become common to discuss four stages of manga criticism.

In the early 1960s, some essays about manga appeared in the journal *Shisō no kagaku* (The Science of Thought, 1946–1996). Cultural sociologist Shunsuke Tsurumi, along with Chisui Fujikawa and film critic Tadao Satō, first treated manga, from caricatures and newspaper strips to entertaining stories, as an object worthy of intellectual investigation. They also discussed it as part of a specifically Japanese popular culture. Previously story-manga had been mainly addressed by educators who were suspicious of comics as readings for children, but now the interest shifted from pedagogy to popular culture and from children to youth. Tsurumi and his collaborators illuminated the potential of manga to be a medium for adults and related it to social issues of their time. Their main focus was on prewar manga series, like *Norakuro*, and on the rental comics (*kashihon gekiga*),⁸ which were influenced by *kamishibai* (the paper theater thriving between the 1930s and the 1950s) and distributed by rental libraries. They understood Japanese comics as an outgrowth of traditional folk culture, characterized by close ties between creators and consumers in small communities. For Tsurumi, manga did not belong to either “pure art” (*junsui geijutsu*) or “mass art” (*taishū geijutsu*), but rather to what he called “liminal art” (*genkai geijutsu*) (Tsurumi 1982, 1987).

The second stage began around the time Junzō Ishiko, Susumu Gondō, Jun Kajii, and Sadao Yamane (who wrote articles on comics under the name of Asajirō Kikuchi) founded the review journal *Mangashugi* (Manga-ism, 1967–1978). Like earlier critics, they were primarily interested in comics as a medium of communicating social experiences, and they favorably discussed “anti-authoritarian” comics like those by Sanpei Shirato and Yoshiharu Tsuge. In contrast to the critics from the early 1960s, these commentators did not believe that such comics were read by ordinary Japanese people, particularly by those with ties to the traditional organizations of the working class, like trade unions. Rather, they identified the genre's audience as socially weak and isolated young men who built cultural communities through rental libraries and the comics available there. In addition, Ishiko criticized Tsurumi and his group for grounding their analysis in literary criticism (*bungakushugi*). He thought that manga should be evaluated through a distinctive approach that would allow a grasp of its blending of verbal and pictorial arts and its particular methods of story-telling (Ishiko 1967, 1972, 1973).

In the 1970s, a generation of critics, born in the 1950s and the very first to be raised on manga, rejected Shunsuke Tsurumi and Junzō Ishiko alike. These new critics, who included Tomohiko Murakami, Azusa Nakajima, and Yoshihiro Yonezawa, argued that

Tsurumi and Ishiko paid too much attention to the societal roles of certain manga and to groups to which they did not belong, such as nonorganized proletarian youth. They claimed that the proper approach for critics was to question themselves as individual readers; in other words, to verbalize their own personal experience of reading manga (Nakajima 1986; Yonezawa 1987; Murakami, Takatori, and Yonezawa 1987). Therefore, they went down in the history of manga criticism as the “first-person narrators” (*boku-gatari*). In addition, they were the first to state that “only those who really love manga” had the authority to discuss manga. They further argued that those who loved manga would not discuss it with the vocabulary of areas such as literature or film studies, nor would they speak from a distant and analytical perspective (Takeuchi 1997).

This kind of manga criticism sprang from the readers’ feelings. Unlike traditional literary or art criticism, it emphasized the exchange among kindred spirits and about emotions. The critics, posing simply as manga readers, were at the same level as their audiences, and their analyses, rather than being self-critical, functioned as an arbiter of taste and a means for the fan community’s self-affirmation. This approach, coupled with a refusal to explain oneself to outsiders including society as a whole, has also been typical of women’s writings on girls’ comics (*shōjo manga*). Just as rental comics fostered a sense of community for their readers in the early 1960s, both *shōjo manga* and writings about them have created a sense of identity among female readers since the 1980s. Readers of *shōjo manga* have usually expected critics of the genre to be their equal partners, using the comics that they both read mainly to exchange and discuss gendered experiences (Takahashi 2001; Spies 2001, 2003). This world appears hermetic to outsiders, but it was that very insistence on subjectivity and emotional community that prepared the ground for the articulation of a distinct manga aesthetics.

In the early 1990s, the semiotic investigation of manga’s representational conventions began to flourish under the rubric of studying manga as a medium of expression (*manga hyōgenron*). Inuhiko Yomota (1994) and Fusanosuke Natsume, who pioneered this movement, disdained the extremes of both politically motivated criticism and extremely subjective criticism. This allowed more readers, including an older population, to join in the discussions about manga (Natsume 1992a, 1997; Inoue 1995; *Manga* 1996). Yomota and Natsume conceived of the manga creator not as an outstanding artist, but rather as a talented craftsman who conveys meaning through drawing and through guiding the reader’s gaze via panel arrangements. Their semiotic approach was intended to claim manga as an autonomous medium by explicating its unique means of expression from an internal perspective. Attention was paid to such areas as speech balloons, impact lines, pictograms, and lettering, as well as the possibilities for visually rendering invisible phenomena such as sounds and smells. Writers like Natsume wanted their audience to reenact the achievements of the creator and to become aware of the mechanisms of reading manga, but they did not show much interest in plural or idiosyncratic readings of familiar works. In an apparent attempt to justify their chosen subject, they took their examples not from the margins, but from the average “quality goods” of manga. This turned manga criticism into a reassuring, rather than disturbing, area of discourse. Unlike earlier critics, the authors of the fourth

wave veered away from discussing manga in terms of content or politically sensitive issues (be it pornography or neonationalism), but they affirmed commercialism as an indispensable condition for manga. While such tendencies of an apolitical approach to manga still prevail in Japanese manga criticism and research as the recent publications by Natsume, Miyamoto, and even Itō show, it is wrong to presume that the four stages sketched in this section replaced each other in the course of time; fragments of all of them can be found in current writings. At a symposium entitled Possibilities and Requirements of Academic Manga Studies (*Gakujutsuteki Manga Kenkyū no Kanōsei to Kadai*, Ritsumeikan University Kyōto) in 2000, Natsume stated that his interest in manga expression had been triggered by his aversion to Ishiko's political and content oriented approach, which he believed treated manga as a mere mirror (*han'eiron*). He went on to say, however, that he had come to realize the importance of opening the field to the perspectives of sociology, media studies, and foreign comics cultures (Natsume 2000).

Dis/continuity with Premodern Painting: On Recurring Assumptions About Manga's "Origins"

As I mentioned earlier, few people in Japan would link manga's astonishing international popularity to the unique system used to produce and distribute the works. It is more likely that they would give the credit to Japanese culture—not only to Osamu Tezuka, the "god of manga," but also to Japanese artistic traditions such as the *Chōjū giga* scrolls.⁹

Tracing contemporary manga back to their origin in medieval picture scrolls is a discursive act that in itself establishes traditions. This has served various purposes in modern Japan, from justification for seriously studying the field to sheer fashionable populism (that is, nowadays, it is much more often utilized with the connotation that high art is "out"). In any arena, status claims like these work most effectively by claiming national particularity; in the case of manga, the argument for "Japaneseness" in the medium is made by assuming a continuity between medieval arts and contemporary comics. However, from a foreign perspective it is easy to repeat this position without realizing its essential conservatism, and to overlook that the agents of such claims have changed since the 1990s. Recently, Japanese manga historians emphasize discontinuity as a basis for manga and admit its foreign origins. Too often, however, these historians disregard the mixture of continuity and discontinuity that has given rise to manga, and they therefore deprive the form of its historical complexity. I argue here that manga is historically (as well as aesthetically and culturally) ambiguous. It therefore seems much more appropriate, not to say manga-like, to pursue this ambiguity rather than settling for, or rejecting outright, modernist claims of national purity based on an alleged continuity.¹⁰

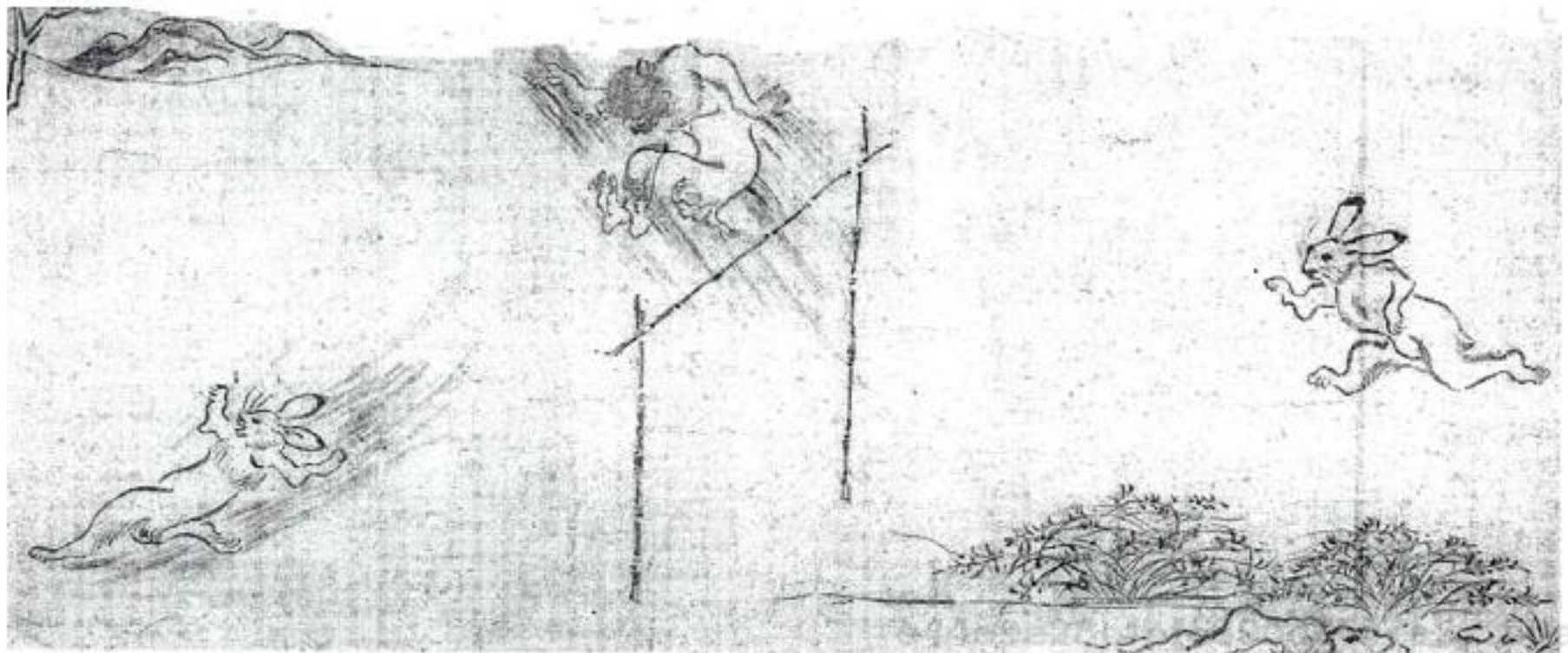
Manga experts, media figures, and art scholars have all claimed manga's cultural value by linking it to old Japanese art, most often medieval picture scrolls like *Chōjū giga* and famous printed works like *ukiyo-e* artist Katsushika Hokusai's *Hokusai manga*

(1814–1878). In the case of the manga experts, this lineage originally allowed them to elevate their field in the eyes of the public. In the early 1990s, when manga started to gain international attention, manga critics also used this link to highlight the “Japaneseness” of the medium. Their arguments did often play into the agendas of ideologues, but by focusing on an uninterrupted Japanese art, they also made subcultural issues visible to the society in general. While some assume that manga critics’ emphasis on the “Japaneseness” of manga was a calculated political decision (Kinsella 2000, 97), it more likely sprang from their ignorance of both Japanese art history and of foreign comics cultures. It is easy to stress the national uniqueness of manga, if you are the frog in the well; that is: if you are not familiar with artworks other than *Chōjū giga*, it is easy to believe in continuity. Moreover, if you do not know many American or Franco-Belgian comics, it is easy to claim Japanese uniqueness. This changed when Japanese critics went abroad and got in touch with foreign comics experts beginning in the late 1990s.

References to traditional fine arts were once used to elevate manga culturally, but in the early twenty-first century, manga is much more often used to popularize fine art. This is evident in some introductions to Japanese art history, which trace the “origins of manga” back to three specific phenomena. The first of these is *hakubyō*, the monochrome drawings characteristic of *Chōjū giga* as well as some narrative *yamato-e* paintings of the Kamakura era, the second is the pictorial expression of movement in scrolls of the twelfth century like *Bandainagon* (Illustrated Stories of the Courtier Bandainagon), and the third is the integration of script into picture planes (Hidaka 2003, 40–43). Some publications place segments of *Chōjū giga* side by side with a panel from Tezuka’s *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astro Boy*), using speed-lines (lines which indicate actions such as running or jumping) to suggest an uninterrupted continuity of Japanese pictorial traditions (*Shūkan Nihon* 2002, 19).

However, claiming *Chōjū giga* as the direct ancestor of modern manga lacks historical accuracy. This artwork, which has been considered a national treasure since 1899 and was placed in the Imperial Museum in 1906, differs fundamentally from manga. *Chōjū giga* was painted by hand, and, since it resided originally in the Kōzanji temple, it was accessible only to certain people under restricted conditions. Moreover, it lacks a written narrative text (*kotobagaki*) and a clearly identifiable, coherent narrative (Köhn 2005).

These differences raise doubts about whether *Chōjū giga* can actually be called manga’s ancestor. Nonetheless, many people in Japan cling to this notion regardless of researchers’ arguments to the contrary and their own awareness that the comparison is free of any substantial reference to the respective artworks. The Japanese mass media and the educational system promote such a view and emphasize purely *formal* semblances between manga and old art (see Berndt 2002), without ever considering whether manga creators actually knew any of the now-canonized artworks. Tezuka, for example, appreciated *Chōjū giga* and often discussed simplification, exaggeration, metamorphosis, and satirical representation as its manga-like features. He admitted, though, that he saw reproductions of the complete scrolls only in 1955,¹¹ eight years



A manga history illustration of *Astro Boy* juxtaposed with a detail from Tanyū Kanō's reproduction of the *Kōzanji Chōjū giga*.
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after the publication of the groundbreaking work *Shin-takarajima* (New Treasure Island), which first established his distinctive style of manga storytelling.

Modern analyses of manga and its origins tend to emphasize painting while ignoring areas such as literature and the performing arts.¹² Since the rise of European *Japonisme* in the late nineteenth century, Japanese elites had favored painting as a means of cultural self-assertion. As painting could easily cross language barriers, it was believed to be a good vehicle for Japanese particularity, and it was also authorized by European culture. Painting in the modern sense, which was brought to Japan through Europe, foregrounds purely pictorial representations; this is completely different from the intertwining of pictures and literature that was common to Japanese art before

modernization. According to manga historian Hirohito Miyamoto, manga became a subgenre of painting at the end of the nineteenth century, “when forms of artistic expression that combined text and image had to be identified either as ‘literature’ or ‘painting’” (Miyamoto 2002, 44). In other words, the meaning of “manga” after modernization was narrower than the meaning it held in the Tokugawa period.

Today, the word “manga,” which is used outside Japan to describe “Japanese comics,” primarily means “story-manga.” But this emphasis on narratives was not—as often presumed—inherited from Hokusai’s pictorial encyclopedia *Hokusai manga*. When the encyclopedia’s first volume appeared in 1814, “manga” signified an “entirety of acts by which all sorts of things are drawn in all sorts of styles, and a vast amount of pictures as its result” (Miyamoto 2003a, 322). (The word itself comes from the Chinese name for a heron that moves in a peculiar way.) But around 1900, the term came to mean “satirical and funny picture” (*fūshi kokkei no ga*), and thus signified a certain style of pictures.¹³ Journalists and painters with a modern Western education, such as Yukichi Fukuzawa’s nephew Shūtārō Imaizumi (or Ippyō)¹⁴ and the Western-style painter Hakutei Ishii, considered modern manga as something to view individually rather than to read together with other people and, therefore, often aloud. Thus, they suppressed Tokugawa period traditions of entertaining literature that combined reading, watching, and talking, as well as transitional phenomena, like the early modern *ponchi-e* (literally *Punch* pictures), which came from these traditions. Whereas *ponchi-e* provided wordplays as well as verbal and pictorial allegories that depended on a shared collective knowledge of symbols and stories, “manga” in the early twentieth century was based on pithy pictures rather than on verbal elements (Miyamoto 2003b).

Manga researchers and critics have emphasized this discontinuity since the mid-1990s. Fusanosuke Natsume has stated that “in the Meiji era, Japan’s traditional aesthetics experienced a break with the past, collided with the completely different expression of modern Euroamerican comic strips, and was absorbed by it,” and that “before long, a modern form, that is, the panel sequence of the Euroamerican comic-strip (in other words, the function of articulating discrete moments of time in the course of events) was imported” (Inoue 1995, 209; see also Yamamoto 2004). Experts like Natsume and Miyamoto understand manga as a fundamentally *modern* phenomenon, and they point out three characteristics in that regard: First, they refer to the imported concept of the panel or single frame, which rendered the previously ambiguous pictorial time and space unequivocal. (This was a break from traditional pictures scrolls, for example, in which the representation of time and space was often indefinite—several moments sequentially depicted on the same picture plane, and the space represented from more than one central perspective.) Second, they stress the emergence of newspapers and magazines as modern mass media, and third, they link manga to Japan’s distinctive modernization, which took the form of Westernization.

This argument for discontinuity in the field, which results from thorough historical research, counters popular assertions of continuity. An absolute denial of continuity, however, ignores the complexities not only of manga itself,¹⁵ but also of painting as

a form of Japanese fine art. Unlike the term “manga,” the term “fine art” (*bijitsu*) was imported from European languages, but that said, fine arts themselves were less modernized than literature; at least the traditionalist branch of Japanese painting (*nihonga*) embodied continuity. Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the term “manga,” regardless of its new connotations, was considered by some to be an unwelcome Tokugawa era anachronism (see Miyamoto 2003a). Others, however, appreciated manga because it allowed for more freedom of expression than a “beautiful” painting. Seiki Hosokibara, already an experienced cartoonist and critic when he published Japan’s first manga history in 1924, was a member of the latter camp. In the introduction to his book, he distinguished manga from painting because of its “anatomical” stance and its interest in impure things, while in the main chapters he highlighted manga-like paintings. It should be noted, however, that Hosokibara’s notion of painting differed from modern Western ideas of painting as fine art. For example, he believed that the creator of *Chōjū giga* was “the pioneer of Japan’s manga artists,” because he worked in an era which recognized neither a division between painting and literature nor a distinction between beauty and “probing into the facts of life” (Hosokibara 1924, 8).

All this suggests an intertwining of continuity and discontinuity. From a nationalist perspective, what is important is only *whether* an artwork like *Chōjū giga* is a predecessor of manga—a claim that manga historians would categorically deny, as demonstrated above. The much more important questions regard *in what way* critics have related modern manga to pictorial traditions and *which artistic traditions* they have had in mind. Emphasizing formal semblances does make sense if it reveals historic differences within the similar. Reflecting upon such differences could be stimulating not only for manga researchers but also for contemporary readers. This is particularly true since manga readers seem to be more interested in parody of and self-reference to traditions of contemporary manga genres than they are in issues of cultural authorization or premodern artworks.

It should be clear that the definition of manga springs in part from references to certain traditions, and vice versa. For example, those who claim that manga is directly descended from premodern painting tend to think of manga as a graphic art rather than a form of pictorial storytelling; they refrain from reflecting upon the modernity of the medium that Natsume finds in the three characteristics mentioned above and Itō finds in a specific treatment of comics characters. In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate that manga studies will have to deal with the ambiguity of the medium and, indeed, will need to bring out the uncertainties of the form, not only with regard to manga’s alleged traditions but also in a more general sense, with regard to manga’s present functioning and manga’s potential to go beyond narrow identity politics.

Notes

1. This is especially apparent in Sharon Kinsella’s *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (2000). In this instance, the actual subjects—editors of major manga publishing houses and manga artists—are not allowed to speak for themselves. See

Tsuji (2001) as an example of affirming formal continuity, and Yiengpruksawan (2000) for a critical art historical stance.

2. The Japanese translation of Napier's first edition of her book was critically reviewed by Ogawa (2004). A revised edition of Napier's book in English was published in 2005 with a slightly different title *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. One of the rare considerations of Japanese discourse linked to critical reflections upon the treatment of animated movies within Japanese studies can be found in Lamarre (2004/2005).

3. It should be noted in this context that the term "anime," as it is used outside Japan, is mostly unrelated to its two basic meanings in Japanese. There, it signifies a television series in limited-animation style; this meaning is originally subcultural and does not apply to Miyazaki's fully animated movies of feature-film length shown in theaters. But the term also means Japanese cel animation, which is appreciated abroad, so that Miyazaki's movies are praised as "anime" on a national rather than a subcultural level. As an introduction, see Tsugata (2004).

4. This can be said only with the reservation that the existence of gender-specific genres in anime is not identical with that of manga and needs further examination.

5. In the *International Journal of Comic Art*, Japanese writers (mainly women) have recently been introducing sources and materials in English that are fundamental to the study of manga in Japan (Ōgi 2001; Onoda 2002).

6. Representative of this trend are Kusaka (2000) and Ogino and Miyahara (2001). For a critical review see Natsume (2003).

7. In this regard, Itō's argumentation is clearly indebted to Ōtsuka (1994).

8. There is some critical disagreement about whether *gekiga* is to be distinguished from manga. This depends on whether the historically specific term "gekiga" is applied universally and whether "manga" signifies "comics" in general or a certain kind of comics.

9. This four-scroll artwork from the twelfth century is now officially named *Chōjū jinbutsu giga* (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Men), but the general public still refers to it as *Chōjū giga*, the title under which it was first registered as a national treasure in modern Japan. Since comparisons with contemporary manga tend to concentrate on the first scroll with its mostly humorous representations of only animals while leaving out the others, it is not completely inappropriate to speak of *Chōjū giga*. Furthermore, the popular discourse takes it for a fact that *Chōjū giga* was created by the priest Sōjō Toba (or Kakuyū, 1053–1140), whereas art historians have already revealed this to be an Tokugawa era ascription.

10. For an example not primarily related to manga research, see Fukushima (2003). Although the author's attempt to relate theater and comics is innovative and highly stimulating, from a manga studies perspective her argument is diminished by two things. First, she equates manga with a particular "Japaneseness" (apart from the historic transformation of manga as comics), and second, she assumes the continuity of this kind of "manga-likeness" (in contrast to the interplay of continuity and discontinuity that she acknowledges for Japanese theater).

11. According to Tezuka (1982), this exposure came through a special issue of *Iwanami shashin bunkō*.

12. Within Japanese manga research, the so-called paper theater (*kamishibai*) is an exception; its eminent influence on story-manga as *gekiga* has been mentioned in all manga histories since the 1960s.

13. Even today, "manga" is often translated as "funny, exaggerated pictures." But the Japanese character for "man" has a range of meanings, such as broad, scattered, and careless, which might connote humor but do not necessarily denote it.

14. Ippyō Imaizumi worked for Yukichi Fukuzawa's newspaper *Jiji shimpō* from 1890 until 1899. His successor there was Rakuten Kitazawa, whose *Jiji manga* comic strips, begun in 1902, have entered manga history and made their creator the alleged heir of *Hokusai manga*.

15. It is questionable, for example, in what way Tezuka's emphasis on storytelling instead of splendid pictures, or the dissolution of the geometrical panel layout in girls' comics of the 1970s, relates to premodern traditions, modernist achievements and postmodern relativizations.