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Images to be "read": Murakami Takashi's mangaesque nihonga-like paintings

The discussion of Murakami Takashi's paintings has been dominated by representational issues. Critics usually read these pictures in regard to manga and Japanese painting. Often, the word "manga" serves as a mere cue for cute characters, and *nihonga* (traditionalist modern painting) attracts attention as a bridge between premodern art and popcultural imagery. Informed by the perspective of manga studies, this paper intends to illuminate where *nihonga* and manga meet by shifting the focus from reading motifs to viewing images, while pursuing what kind of manga and what kind of *nihonga* are at play here; it focuses on highly codified, "readable" images which are, aesthetically, as much reminiscent of war-time *nihonga* as of the globally most popular kind of manga.[1]

As is widely known, after eleven years of studying *nihonga* at Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku (Tokyo University of the Arts), Murakami Takashi (b. 1962) was the first *nihonga* painter to graduate from the respective doctoral course in 1993. Retrospectively however, he dates the beginning of his career back to installations of the early 1990s, that is, to his departure from *nihonga*. His *Randoseru Project* (1991), *Sea Breeze* (1992) or *Lucky Seven Stars* (1993) do not impress with superb craftsmanship, while leaning on Japanese subject matter and stylistic conventions, but rather challenge the viewer to conceptually question contemporary society and its art. In 1991, Murakami made his debut with a gallery show called *Takashi, Tamiya*, in which he referred to toymaker Tamiya, by intertwining the company's logo, the American flag and figures of American soldiers in the *Signboard TAMIYA* series. Favoring contemporary art (*gendai bijutsu*), he distanced himself from "Japanizing" with respect to material, technique, motifs and (comforting) impact, that is, central characteristics of *nihonga* as *kindai bijutsu*. Yet, it has almost fallen into oblivion that at the very same time, he himself created and exhibited *nihonga*, for example *Matamata* (Again and again),[2] and *Colours* (1991),[3] monumental paintings with an emphasis on materiality, especially the visible surface pigments. While these works are apparently be kept under wraps now, Murakami explained them in his dissertation which pursued the *Meaning of the Meaninglessness*

[1] A first version of this paper was presented as a lecture on the occasion of the *@Murakami* exhibition at the MMK Museum Frankfurt, on 1 November, 2008. For the Krakow conference (Oct. 2010) and its proceedings, I extended the discussion of "readable images", as an addition to my previous essay on Murakami: Berndt (2005) which is only available in German.

[2] Appeared in: NHK Kyōiku (1998).

[3] Reproduction in: Gendai (1993: 34–35).

of Meaning. In chapter III, he dedicated almost five pages to the *Colours* series, revealing his references to Yves Klein's monochrome blue and *nihonga* master Higashiyama Kaii's *gunjō-iro* (especially in the latter's *fusuma-e* murals in the Tōshōdaiji temple, Nara, 1975–1980), but also to Tokuoka Shinsen's unfinished *Fuji* (1965), for him an ironic response to Mark Rothko.

By blowing up his *Colours* paintings, Murakami meant to demonstrate their "meaninglessness":

To their over-masterpiece size, I added experimentally irony regarding nihonga's most indispensable items of nobility = ultramarine blue [gunjō] + *the Japanese people's "tears" + the Japanese art world (irony insofar as expensive material generates monetary value), and I created a work whose picture plane composition rested on entrance-exam assignments, trying out whether such a work could become a site of aura for Japanese viewers.*[4]

To art historian Kitazawa Noriaki, these paintings were a mere parody of pastose (or *matière* oriented) *nihonga*; they remained within the very circle they parodied or even criticized, as *nihonga* about *nihonga* discourse.[5] Shortly after, in the U.S., Murakami achieved an external perspective and seemed to have realized what art critic Nagoya Satoru summarized later in regard to neo-nihonga artists of the post-Murakami generation: *The art with which Japan can achieve "internationality", is limited to nihonga, manga and anime.*[6] Remarkably, after adventuring into installations which did not look Japanese at face value, Murakami returned to painting in the mid-1990s, and precisely to a sort which suggested rapprochement toward *nihonga*, not only because of its cultural hybridity or decorative qualities; rather because it involved viewers instead of confronting them. One way to achieve commonality is to lean on conventional symbols, such as the mountain Fuji, the cherry blossoms, or the rising sun in modern *nihonga*, posthuman characters and popcultural flower imagery in Murakami's case. Such signs invite the viewer to read motifs, while distracting him from the painting's materiality and haptic properties. This distraction is facilitated by Murakami's thin coating which obliterates the traces of the artist's hand. Deploying acrylic paint instead of traditional mineral pigments or water colours, Murakami's paintings achieve the look of prints or photographs. Their smooth surface does not draw attention to the artist; it rather serves the viewer's unrestrained eye movement. Although supposed to be rather "read" than "watched", the "reading" is not directed to critical meaning as in Murakami's former installations (which were related to the Atomic bombs, the American influence on Japanese postwar culture, and consumerism). Now, the motifs' "readability" easens the burden of signification, opening up a space for emotional, affective, communal – and economic – meanings instead.[7]

Murakami's *727* (pronounced: *sebun-tsū-sebun*; 1996)[8] is a good example in that regard. The New York MoMA gives the following description:

"Mr. DOB, the whimsical, sharp-toothed character riding the wave at center, is Murakami's first signature creation inspired by the anime (animated film) and manga (comic book) characters that have achieved cult status in Japanese youth culture. His name is a contraction of the Japanese slang expression "dobojite", or "why?" and it is literally spelled out in his facial features and appendages, ensuring we recognize him in spite of his ever-changing appearance. Here Mr. DOB is borne on a tide of traditional Japanese forms. The wave, spanning the length of three panels that evoke a painted folding screen, is strongly suggestive of the well-known woodblock prints of the Japanese artist Hokusai (1760–1849). About twenty layers of paint, resembling lacquer, were built up then scraped away to create a variegated abstract background in Nihonga style, a fusion of Japanese and Western artistic approaches that developed in the late nineteenth century. Of 727 Murakami has said, "The work is not particularly representative of anything. It is simply a combination of all the available techniques that I had at the time"."[9]

Whether the wave actually points to Hokusai or rather, as Murakami himself and animation director Takahata Isao[10] have maintained, to those clouds on which the sword deity *Gohō no dōji* makes his entrance in the second scroll of *The Miraculous Origins of Mt. Shigi* (*Shigisan engi emaki*), is not as important as the above quoted words that *727* is

[4] Murakami (1993: n.p.).
[5] Kitazawa (2003: 211–212).
[6] Nagoya (2008: 49).

[7] For a discussion of "meaning" and "signification" in manga see: Lamarre (2010).
[8] For a reproduction see: Kaikai Kiki (2007: 181–182).
[9] New York MoMA.
[10] NHK Kyōiku (1997), Takahata (1999: 36–37).

indifferent to representation (either of the outdated West-Japanese cosmetic brand *727* or *nihonga*'s role in Japan's modernization). Michael Darling, one of the curators of the Los Angeles *Super Flat* show (2001), notes:

"The insistent abstract planarity of the Nihonga style, matched with the flatness of manga pictorial conventions make for paintings that push against the surface of the picture plane, both asserting their in-the-moment contemporaneity, and their emphasizing the superficiality of the imagery. These are just pictures of cartoon characters, the paintings feign, paper-thin confections of consumer culture that have no real meaning at all. If only that were the case."[11]

Intertwining planarity with shallowness, *727* allows for a different, relational kind of meaning, through shared experiences. In his dissertation, Murakami pointed to the Japanese institution of entrance exams as one such experience with respect to his *Colours* paintings. In Japan, applicants to art colleges are not just to present their portfolio, but also to take a test: In order to come up to the given subject within the limited time frame, students are taught to put aside contents or concept-related thought and concentrate instead onto quickly making a picture which may impress the examiners, last but not least by suggesting solid technical skills. *727* meets such requirements with its clear L-shape composition and its misty space-like background. But it also addresses shared experiences in a wider sense, related to manga characters. No wonder that it was exhibited in the *The Manga Age* show.[12]

Murakami's paintings point to a specific kind of *nihonga* which is not only super-flat but also super-polished, or super-smooth. In the catalogue to his *Super Flat* exhibition (2000), he mentions Higashiyama Kaii, Tsuchida Bakusen, Maeda Seison, and Yokoyama Taikan. The latter was a revolutionary painter in his youth, but his career saw a second peak in the 1940s, when he painted, for example, an astonishingly different kind of Fuji paintings (*Reihō yonshu*, 1940), displaying Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms as accessible, sufficiently vague, unshocking, non-urban, beautiful, reassuring and comforting signs.

Precisely such symbolism recommended *nihonga* for nationalist ideology in the first place. In order to serve the modern nation, pictures had to be more than perfectly made artifacts or decorative spectacles; they had to lend themselves to profound meanings which facilitated allegedly stable, unequivocal identities. Yokohama's war-time *nihonga* are manifestations of what Walter Benjamin called the "aestheticization of politics". This aestheticization rested heavily upon the "readability" of paintings, as is confirmed, for example, by *nihonga*'s postwar development: Many artists turned from "symbolism" to so-called *matière* (for example, thick coating of paint, *atsunuri*), instead of reviving Taishō-era attempts at a rather ugly and disturbing *nihonga*, for example by Kyoto artists such as Kainoshō Tadaoto. Painters such as Ōno Hidetaka, Yuda Hiroshi and Sugiyama Yasushi favored haptic qualities and the viewer's corporeality over codification and "readability", pastose pigments over smooth surfaces, non-narrative, abstract painting or even the image as artifact over ideology. In addition, they exhibited a certain scpeticism toward technical mastership of the kind which aimed at controlling materials and techniques, rather leaving things to chance eventually.

Murakami's *727* obviously distances itself from these postwar attempts. Not unlike *otaku* culture which is said to have its beginnings in war-time Japan,[13] Murakami's super-smooth painting seems to return to a past, when the majority of *nihonga* were made to be read. Its readablity at the expense of materiality makes it "mangaesque".

Murakami's works are often related to "manga". Closer inspection, however, reveals that they do not refer to the sort of sequential art which Murakami himself was deeply influenced by, namely Miyazaki Hayao's *Kaze no tani no Naushikā* (1982–1994) and Ōtomo Katsuhiro's *AKIRA* (1982–1990).[14] Being anything but super-flat, neither in regard to their narratives nor their pictorial style, these series stem from an era when authorship and "meaningfulness" were still relevant in manga culture.

The maturation of manga in Japan has given rise to an enormous range of expressions and readings.[15] Yet, only very few readers enjoy manga in the plural. The majority clinges to one specific style, which has been shaped by a specific publication format, that

[11] Darling (2001: 67).
[12] Manga no jidai (1998: 347).

[13] Ōtsuka & Ōsawa (2005).
[14] Interview (2004: 36).
[15] For a more detailed version of this part see: Berndt (2010).

is, serialization in monthly or weekly manga magazines and successive *tankōbon* editions. In Europe and America, this kind of manga is represented by pioneers such as *Dragonball* and *Sailormoon*, which inaugurated the present manga boom around 1996, as well as by recent frontrunners such as *One Piece* and *NARUTO*. Special attention deserves that such series invite derivative fan creations (fanzines: *dōjinshi*), and that they have given rise to more or less professional manga by non-Japanese creators.

Fans usually emphasize the diversity of manga stories and genres, but many people picture manga as graphic narratives that invite readers' immersion, first of all, by means of attractive, mostly cute characters. Manga fans are usually less interested in manga as a particular form of graphic storytelling, but rather in the "language" which manga series provide. Calling manga a "language" implies, in the context of this paper, the following three aspects: firstly, that manga's pictorial elements are supposed to be read, or better, quickly grasped, rather than to be watched and contemplated. And it is noteworthy, that this readability is distinct from, for example, the war-time past: it remains indifferent toward signification on an ideological meta-level, being tied more to the immanence of images than "symbolism", and to relational effects than inherent meanings. Today's most popular manga as well as Murakami's painting raise the question what kind of "reading" they actually call for.

Secondly, the highly codified mode of manga expression can be learned. And thirdly, manga lends itself to sharing with others. For dedicated fans, a single manga's intrinsic quality as a work is less important than its potential to facilitate relationships and mediate the formation of taste communities. A typical manga is therefore not a self-contained "graphic novel" by a single author, but a series which unfolds in proximity to its readers' responses, not necessarily heading toward a predetermined conclusion. Manga culture puts emphasis on relations – between readers, and between readers and characters, for example in the form of *kyara-moe* (which is called "flaming" by English-speaking fans). Sometimes criticized for their "violence", many manga feature rather artificial or virtual bodies, whether in the form of immortal *kyara*,[16] or "odorless" *bishōnen* (beautiful boys). Thus, manga seems to match the highly mediatized reality of the 21st century. Likewise typical for the early 21st century is the comforting effect which many readers expect from manga. Manga's emphasis on participation usually serves self-confirmation, of one's own taste, or community.

It is this kind of manga which Murakami refers to. His conceptual approach, however, is not welcomed in Japan. Hosono Fujihiko's manga *Gallery Fake*,[17] for example, juxtaposes the real charisma of a poor *mecha* designer to the allegedly exploitative attitude of an artist reminiscent of Murakami. While in Europe and America, Murakami is regarded as specifically Japanese and often also subversive, in Japan, he is denied such a position. Symptomatically, he has already held a show in Versailles, but not yet in the Japanese pavillion at the Venice Biennal. After all, his art has not influenced either *nihonga* or manga so far.

[16] For the distinction between *character* and *chara/kyara* see: Itō (2005).

[17] Hosono (2001).

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