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ABSTRACT

"Here in the Western World: A Comparison between Japanese Manga in America and American comics" examines the structural and compositional differences between Japanese manga and American comics. Specifically, it focuses on the ways in which the two similar mediums split from each other in the early 1960s to become two distinct "genres" in the comic book world. The project traces the "localization" of Japanese manga to fit more "western" sensibilities regarding both art and content and analyzes the effects of this localization on the work's integrity. Examining firsthand a large number of both American comics and Japanese manga on a structural, authorial, and compositional level enables a tentative conclusion: Japanese manga, though inspired by American comics and cartoons, adopted many Japanese cultural traits that succeed in differentiating manga significantly from the comics that inspired them.

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INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

The birth of the modern form of manga, the one most analogous to American comics, came about in the early 20th century. Works such as Yoshitaka Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants* propelled the medium to more western sensibilities.

After WW2, artists such as the "God of Manga" Osamu Tezuka, Shigeru Mizuki, and Machiko Hasegawa were publishing manga more in-line with not just American sensibilities, but art styles as well. Yet, national cultural and artistic differences between Japan and the U.S. led to two different approaches to creating comics despite ostensibly being the same genre.

Drawing from book history and comic scholarship including Scott McCloud and his seminal work *Understanding Comics* and Neil Cohn's derivative work, *A Different Kind of Cultural Frame*, I examined over 200 issues of comics and 200 collected volumes of manga both in my personal collection and the Media Public Library to reach my tentative conclusion.

UNDERSTANDING MANGA

In comparing the differences in page layout, panel composition, and panel transitions between American comic authors and Japanese "mangaka" (manga artists), McCloud and Cohn note that manga has a "temporal" quality often not found in American comics. McCloud calls it "aspect-to-aspect" and explains that manga pays greater attention to the minutiae of scenes. This "wandering eye" in manga produces different panels all focusing on the same scene, say different angles and "aspects" of a room or event. In contrast, American comics are more focused on action-to-action and subject-to-subject transitions.

FLIPPIN' CRAZY

When Manga was brought to the West, many publishers and licensors thought the best course of action was to "flip" the reading orientation from the Japanese right-to-left to the more natural, for Americans, left-to-right orientation—a bad move. For several reasons. Flipping the art lends to a more confused reader, as the layouts and compositions of each page are reversed and often do not work in the new orientation. Thankfully, this trend has fallen out of favor, with most publishers now retaining the original orientation.

Some examples of important canonical manga being "flipped" for a western release include but are by no means limited to Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*, Osamu Tezuka's *Phoenix*, Masamume Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell*, Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind,* and Yukito Kishiro's *Battle Angel Alita.*

FISTICUFFS

An incredibly popular genre of manga is the "battle" series whose focus is people fighting other people. Emphasizing the "wandering eye" aspect of manga, most battle series tend to show a near blow-by-blow account of a given fight, lending page-time to windups and reactions to each hit as well.

Many superhero comics do the opposite. Fights are punctuation, a quick release comparative to the rest of the book. For example, Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*, issue 6, has an action sequence that is only 4 pages of a 20-page comic. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, famous for its fight scene between Batman and Superman, only devotes 9 pages in a 50-page issue to the iconic sequence. In contrast, Yûki Tabata's *Black Clover* or Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball*, series emblematic of the general trends of battle manga, feature fights that last for 60 pages if not longer. Fights in manga are also frequently intricately choreographed and intentionally laid out to be read with the reader's eye "gliding" from each panel to the next.

Sidenote: When the art is flipped, it becomes much harder to follow what is going on, as the flow has been reversed.

« **Read Right to Left!** Two pages from Yûki Tabata's *Black Clover*, part of a four chapter-long battle arc. In it, the protagonist, Asta, launches an attack with his sword on the antagonist, Mars. Notice how much time is given to the windup of Asta's attack, and the transition panel of Mars after the large impact panel on page two.

Left: **Read Left to Right!** A page from Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* from the iconic Batman vs Superman encounter (No. 4). Notice how panel transitions are more arbitrary. Blows aren't connected to each other. The focus is less on the fight itself and more on the inner thoughts of Batman as he fights Superman.

A SLICE OF LIFE

Another example of the "wandering eye" aspect of manga is prevalent in the "slice of life" genre. Think of something like Bryan Lee O'Malley's comic *Lost at Sea* or, to switch mediums, something like *The Office*. Their characters are existing in a world and bounce off each other with less of a focus on plot. Compare:

« **Read Left to Right!** A page from the comic *Lost at Sea*. Notice how the focus of the scene, the two girls jumping on the beds, is still in constant "motion." The boy enters the room, and in-between panels the implication of time passing is there. The "camera" of the comic is effectively pushing the moment in time *actively* forward. The focus is less on subtle characterization or "letting the eye wander" and more on the momentum of the girls and the reaction of the boy.

» **Read Right to Left!** A page from volume one of Inio Asano's *Dead Dead Demon's Dededede Destruction*. Note that the scene is similar to that of *Lost at Sea*, a group of friends hanging out, but in *Dead Dead Demon's* case, the camera seems to be frozen in time, examining different aspects of the scene. It lingers instead of pushing the scene forward, as it does in *Lost at Sea*. The camera in *Dead Dead Demon's* is passive in its approach to time passing, allowing the reader's eye to slowly pass over each character in turn for each panel, getting to know them from subtle details like the way they carry themselves.

CONCLUSION

Though manga is the Japanese word for "comic," the differences between American comics and Japanese manga are in the details. The way a page may linger on a moment in time, or the amount of page real estate is lent to "extraneous" details like the leadup to a blow or the fallout from said blow as it happens are characteristic of manga. The "wandering eye" of Japanese manga transforms the medium from one of forward momentum to one of "existing in the moment." This leads to a radically different reading experience, one dictated by the wheel of time over the advancement of plot. These differences should be celebrated, preserved in translation, and not changed for an audience that does not need catering to.

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