

INTRODUCTION:

Manga Beyond Critique?

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue “Manga Culture and Critique” takes as its point of departure a stark contrast to English-language comics discourse, namely that in contemporary Japan manga is only rarely expected to serve as a means of social critique, at least insofar as the by now predominant notion is concerned, i.e. manga as entertaining graphic narratives first serialized in magazines, inviting readers’ affective investment and fans’ participation in more ways than reading. The special-issue articles, however, consider more notions of manga: single-image satirical cartoons on the one pole, “AMO (anime-manga-otaku) culture” on the other. And even if focusing on serialized fiction, they illuminate the vital difference between gendered genres as well as between mainstream and alternative productions. In its general pursuit of socio-critical impacts of manga culture, this special issue concentrates not only on “manga as critique” as tied to a political, and as such societal, stance, but also on manga “criticism,” that is, the reviewing of specific primary and secondary texts, including the already existing body of theoretical accounts. As outlined in the introduction, through the individual discussions of cartoons, graphic narratives, and related criticism, this special issue demonstrates the potential of textual analyses shaped by media-studies concerns, and it suggests to conceptualize manga not as something beyond critique, but as a challenge to widen the very notion of critique, to go beyond traditional biases between text and context, aesthetics and society, affect and reason.

Keywords

critique, graphic narratives, manga studies, media culture, postcritical readings

About the Author

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Since the Triple Disaster, which began to hit the Northeast of Japan on 11 March 2011, foreign journalists, critics and academics have shown a keen interest in manga. Forming an integral part of the contemporary image of Japan, manga is expected to provide access to everyday thoughts and emotions as well as otherwise tabooed socio-critical and subversive voices. But while “subversion” and “criticality” play an almost self-evident role in English-language comics discourse,¹ these terms are not necessarily crucial to Japanese-language manga studies.² From a contemporary Japanese perspective, manga and critique are an unlikely pair.

In part, this is due to the notion of comics most widely shared among all those who create, read and discuss manga: as an art form in its own right, manga is not located in small press productions created by *auteurs*, but in genre-specific magazines by major publishing houses, which serialize fairly conventional fiction.³ The by-now global bestsellers among these series tend to prefer flippant, game-like narratives over social realism and representational earnestness. To critical intellectuals, they often give the impression of escapist consumer goods which promote youth’s indulgence in subcultural fantasies at the cost of commitment to society at large. Manga⁴ such as *One Piece*, *Naruto*, or *Attack on Titan* accommodate first of all the demand for entertainment and self-confirmation and not, as might be expected from the texts’ semiotic density and aesthetic self-reflexivity, an interruption of ingrained reading habits or critical thinking. In turn, they hold the potential to set off a whole range of other activities. Readers’ affective investment has given rise to fanwork, cosplay, and the formation of transnational taste communities. While until the 1980s the Japanese term *manga* denoted comics in the broad sense, from cartoons and comic strips to graphic narratives, since the late 1990s its meaning has departed gradually from the former emphasis on medium specificity to signify a new media culture which includes also anime,⁵ video games, and light novels. The Chinese language constringes anime and manga by means of the name *dòngmàn*; yet, considering the substantial role of fandom, “AMO (anime-manga-otaku) culture,” as Zoltan Kacsuk puts it in his contribution to this special issue, is the more appropriate term.

The kind of manga which is most closely related to AMO culture has attracted academic attention mainly in regard to globalization, national-branding policies (“Cool Japan”), so-called media mix strategies, and fandom. In comparison, manga’s critical role in society and, closely related, its public mission as an art form are mostly assumed to be irrelevant or even non-existent, at least beyond gender-related concerns.⁶ This mindset is being held by a considerable number of critical academics in Japan.⁷ Although for the opposite reason (namely the bias against industrially produced entertainment), it resembles the stance of public authorities who position manga positively as a component of corporate rather than civil society. One telling example is the City of Kyoto, which shifted its responsibility for the

Kyoto International Manga Museum from the Board of Education to the Bureau of Industry Promotion and Tourism, when the initial funding by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) ran out in October 2011. And those Japanese universities which have established manga-related departments (more than a dozen so far and all of them private)⁸ pursue mainly economic reasons: in order to secure the number of students and thereby tuition fee income, the emphasis is put on technical skills rather than critical reading. The latter does not rank highly within Japanese manga criticism and scholarship either. Here, media-studies concerns—mainly related to publication site and format, genre, and target group—tend to take center-stage, whereas close readings and textual analyses stay undervalued. Social disputes about individual works almost never occur.

In addition to the wanting collaboration between the fields of manga studies and literary studies in Japan, the non-critical inclination of the first strikes as a major difference from English-language comics research with its firm roots in literary studies. But two more aspects are noteworthy here. First, there is the fact that critiquing major manga works in public has become almost impossible, under the pretense that critique as such impairs business. As a matter of course, this unwritten rule applies, for example, to the bestsellers serialized in the flagship of manga magazines *Shōnen Jump*. In general, Japanese governmental policy is characterized by the implicit understanding that the interests of large companies (or the nation as their framework) shall take precedence over culture; suffice to consider in which way the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) have engaged in manga-related activities in recent years, compared, for example, to similar attempts by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. The attitude towards fair use of manga images would provide another insightful case: for many years acknowledged in tacit agreement with respect to parody, derivative fan art and, later even, scanlations,⁹ researchers may face restrictions when indulging in critique that disregards industrial and fannish contexts and is therefore not rarely deemed “aggressive,” comparable to the “bite” of political cartoons in Ronald Stewart’s contribution to this special issue. Obviously, producing, selling and reading manga narratives does not necessitate critical endeavors in the same way as, for example, modern novels, which draws attention to the notion of critique, or criticality, itself.

A second aspect of the current difficulty to socially communicate critical political issues by means of graphic narratives is to be found in manga’s sheer quantity and the diversity of genres therein.¹⁰ Although Japan is often named the country of manga, not all Japanese actually read manga, and even those who do have only few in common. In fact, communication about one and the same text among different kinds of readers is rare. While Japanese manga culture is often described as being

very versatile, in reality, the supply of manga texts is too huge for readers to explore genres and works apart from those they are familiar with. One of the few recent instances in which a manga caused a stir across compartmentalized readerships occurred in May 2014, when the prefectures of Fukushima and Osaka (as well as Osaka City) officially complained to the editorial board of the weekly manga magazine *Big Comic Spirits*¹¹ for addressing radiation sickness and radioactive contamination in its semi-documentary manga series *Oishinbo*. This attracted public attention on a nation-wide scale, via SNSs as well as traditional mass media. Created by veteran author Kariya Tetsu (b.1941)¹² and artist Hanasaki Akira (b.1956), *Oishinbo* has been running on and off since 1983, and it had seen 110 *tankōbon* (book) volumes by May 2014. During its early years, it was a representative of the new “adult manga” that appealed to Japan’s salarymen with its presentation of political and economic topics¹³ in an unobtrusive visual language, but by the 2000s, it had assumed the image of a manga which is mainly consumed in waiting rooms or cheap eating-houses. Its very ordinariness raised the question why specifically *Oishinbo* triggered fierce reactions in the public realm, stretching from accusations of scientific untenability to scaremongering. Other manga addressing the aftermath of the nuclear-plant accident were not able to attract the same amount of attention: for example, Hagio Moto’s women’s manga *Nanohana*, which Olga Antononoka discusses in this special issue. One possible answer can be found in the stylistic and narrative conventions which position *Oishinbo* beyond both traditional female manga genres and the kind of global “manga proper” that elicits feelings of affection towards specific characters and invites fans’ participation. *Oishinbo* is a markedly male manga, and not only because of its protagonists. Its character design, line work and paneling are reminiscent of *gekiga*, that is, realist narratives which were put forward as an adult genre in the 1960s. While *gekiga* artists like Tatsumi Yoshihiro (1935-2015) are highly appreciated outside of Japan as creators of alternative comics, in the country, politicians demonstrate their fondness of manga by reference to other artists of that group, namely Saitō Takao (b.1936) and Kawaguchi Kaiji (b.1948). On the occasion of launching the International Manga Award, then foreign minister Asō Tarō presented himself with an illustration by the first,¹⁴ and the latter was commissioned to create the 14-page *Tokyo “X” Day* manga, a supplement to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s brochure *Tokyo Bōsai/Disaster Preparedness Tokyo* (2015).¹⁵ For many younger people, however, *gekiga* is a mere style and a dated one at that (Takeuchi 2013: 180).

The *Oishinbo* incident does not only mirror the limits of social critique as such; it also raises awareness for the intricate criticality of manga. If tied to agenda setting on a society-wide scale, criticality can apparently only be achieved by privileging one specific kind of manga at the expense of manga’s actual diversity. If sought in individual texts exposing hidden truths and questioning oppressive social forces, it may go unnoticed, or, on the contrary, lead to assertions which appear arbitrary

from a Japan-based perspective due to disregard of genre-specific positioning and respective taste communities, gendered ones to begin with. Like other popular media, manga is usually deemed too industrial, conventional, affective, and consumer-oriented to be critical. Precisely this has unleashed well-meaning attempts to defend it. In order to bring to proof manga's socio-critical capacity, Japanese-studies researchers tend to illuminate the initial historical production context of popular manga and anime, while younger fan-turned-researchers from other fields are inclined to lean on traditional literary critique. The latter includes, on the one hand, a treatment of manga's serial and highly contextual narratives, which are open texts insofar as they are meant to be shared, as self-contained works, short-circuiting their representational contents with society. In this case, a "text is deciphered as a symptom, mirror, index, or antithesis of some larger social structure — as if there were an essential system of correspondences..." (Felski), without considering either the complex mediations between text and society or the text's status as co-actor. On the other hand, such search for criticality is usually accompanied by a certain indifference towards multiple ways of reading (not to mention other usages than reading). "We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the 'de' prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the 're' prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception" (Felski). Certainly, manga narratives can be read in a critical way, but this is only one way among others, the conditions of which need to be specified, first of all, with respect to readership, genre, and the broader mediascape.

This special issue is the result of vivid exchange. It began with the panel "Subversion impossible? Rediscovering manga's critical potential after 3-11" at the *Mechademia Conference on Manga, Anime and Media Theory from Japan*, held in Seoul in December 2012,¹⁶ and it continued at the Graduate School of Manga, Kyoto Seika University. Considering different notions of manga, including anime and the wider AMO culture, and pondering several ways of critique, the five articles presented here share the concern about the conditions of possible socio-critical impacts of manga (and anime). With respect to criticality, they distinguish between critique and criticism: while the first – *hihan* – is inclined to be tied to a specific political stance and as such not well-received in contemporary Japanese manga/anime discourse, the latter – *hihyō*, or *hyōron* – relates to the reviewing of specific (primary as well as secondary) texts, not necessarily related to larger societal issues and often taking a journalistic rather than academic form. But focusing on the latter also includes analytical engagement with the already existing specialized manga/anime discourse, which deserves to be not only recognized but also developed across cultural borders, i.e. geopolitical as well as status or field-related borders—something which Zoltan Kacsuk's contribution accomplishes. Emphasis on the first means to search for "manga as critique," "its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize"—something which Ronald Stewart's article sets out to do.

In Stewart's article "Post 3-11 Japanese Political Cartooning with a Satirical Bite: Non-Newspaper Cartoons and their Potential," manga stands for single-frame satirical drawings as a means of political commentary and critique. Published in daily newspapers, cartoons peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, but they have been in constant decline since the 1980s "in regard to the forcefulness of their satire, their number, and their ability to draw popular attention," according to Stewart. Symptomatic in that respect are the early responses to 3-11 which he analyzes, contrasting editorial cartoons with "alternative" ones publicized on the internet. To add an example not discussed by Stewart: symptomatic was also the response by the Japanese government to French caricatures which ridiculed the election of Tokyo as host city of the 2020 Summer Olympics, relating it to radioactively contaminated areas northeast of the Japanese capital.¹⁷ When the Chief Cabinet Secretary filed an official complaint against that, allegedly on behalf of the Fukushima victims, the international press explained the over-reacting with the lack of a satirical tradition: "Unlike many European countries, Japan does not have a vigorous tradition of satire. Its cultural emphasis on the importance of social harmony also discourages public ridiculing of others" (Willacy).¹⁸ The rather "aggressive" agenda setting, the side-taking typical for political satire, which is by now paradigmatically associated with *Charlie Hebdo*, has been regarded in Japan as impious against victims not only by government officials but also critical academics.¹⁹ This very fact calls for acknowledging the affective trait of political critique and the limits of such critique in a globalized world.

Already more than a decade ago Bruno Latour raised the question why critique (including "aggressive" satire) had run out of steam, and he suggested by way of contrast: "The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather" (Latour 246). Olga Antononoka's article "Communicating emotions: How Commercial Manga for Women Approaches 3.11" spots such an arena in manga that do not exhibit an overt critical stance or that do not "bite," so to speak. Taking an investigative rather than evaluative stance, her close reading of one representative text does not look for authoritative messages, which would tell the reader what to think about 3-11 and the disaster's aftermath; rather, it pursues how the text itself invites readers to take different views and thus negotiate different meanings. Comics scholar Charles Hatfield has famously stated that "fragmentation [in comics] urges readers to take a critical role" (xiv). While he refers to the aesthetic materiality of the comics page, Antononoka highlights manga's "fragmented nature" with respect to the intertwining of genre conventions and social topicality, affect and signification, characters' agency and objectification. She arrives at the conclusion that "critical meaning is constructed by re-contextualizing inconsistent elements within a specific context." Genre-related as they are – some derived from women's

manga, others from girls' manga – these elements manifest themselves in character design, paneling, and line work.

Likewise attentive to paneling and line work is Takeuchi Miho in her review article “Kouno Fumiyo’s Hiroshima Manga: A Style-Centered Attempt at Re-reading.” Again a female artist, who exhibits ideological restraint, takes center stage. But as distinct from Hagio Moto’s works, Kouno’s²⁰ do not easily correlate with female manga genres. Besides the fact, that they are not serialized in girls’ or women’s manga magazines, they escape the familiar “clean” look due to lines drawn by hand and surprising arrangements of panel contents. This and the occasional contradictions between dialogue and visuals facilitate the impression of “alternative” manga for regular Japanese readers. Countering reproval by (male) historians whose critique springs from “suspect” feminine traits and rests on the separation of story and style as well as representation and reading practice, Takeuchi successfully demonstrates how Kouno’s manga invite readers to revisit the war-time past by undermining ingrained habits of consuming manga: pauses, retrospects and the need to re-read certain parts as well as the intertwining of vision and touch prompt readers to change their perspective and literally “touch the past.”

Shifting the focus from manga to anime, Selen Çalik’s article “Re-viewing Thomas Lamarre’s *The Anime Machine* After Hayao Miyazaki’s *The Wind Rises*: On the Critical Potential of Anime” ventures to approach a work of criticism, namely Thomas Lamarre’s seminal *The Anime Machine* (2009), through its application to an animated movie, that is, Miyazaki Hayao’s *The Wind Rises* (2013), and vice versa. Intrigued by the critical potential of anime in relation to the notion of indeterminism central to Lamarre’s media theory, she raises the question whether “the conclusions Lamarre arrives at through his readings capture the critical potential of his own theory.” In order to answer it, Çalik expands the discussion of animetic movement and depth by narratological aspects, in particular plot and characters. This suggests itself in the case of *The Wind Rises*, whose narrative setting relates to the destructive reality of a historic war. While admitting that in *The Wind Rises* the criticality towards technology is maintained through anime-specific structures of depth and movement (the absence of ballistic perspective, or the dissociation of destruction with beauty, for example), Çalik eventually concludes that the “analogy Lamarre builds between Miyazaki’s works and Heideggerian philosophy cannot be extended to” this film, because the discussion of depth and movement cannot be separated from that of the plot. With respect to the criticality of anime – first of all, its imagining of a free, non-destructive relation to technology – Çalik shifts the attention from texts to relations between texts and viewers, and from factuality to indetermination and potentiality. Understood as a communicative potential, which can spring from the levels of characterization, plot, and movement, jointly or

severally, she supposes anime to “provide people with the vocabulary and tools to interpret events and articulate themselves, regardless of these anime texts’ specific representational content.”

This orientation corresponds with the main concern of those Japanese AMO-culture critics, who are featured at the center of Zoltan Kacsuk’s article “From ‘Game-like Realism’ to ‘Imagination-oriented Aesthetic’: Reconsidering Bourdieu’s Contribution to Fan Studies in the Light of Japanese Manga and Otaku Theory.” Highlighting the critical potential of manga studies for fields beyond comics research, Kacsuk sets out to interrelate theoretical accounts that have stayed separate due to cultural and language barriers, in particular the AMO-culture discourses in English and Japanese, and separate fields of scholarship related to subjects such as comics, fandoms and cultural industries. His attempt at bridging the existing gaps starts out from the work of specific critics; first he introduces Ōtsuka Eiji as the missing link between Azuma Hiroki and Itō Gō, and then he lets Henry Jenkins mediate between Azuma and Pierre Bourdieu. Leaning on Azuma’s concept of game-like realism, which has not been made available in English translation so far, Kacsuk develops his own notion of the “imagination-scape” as a counterpart to representational realism. Subsequently, he approaches the imagination-scape, which is marked by the simultaneous invocation of the game-like character/player duality on the one hand and the fictionalization of the lifeworld on the other hand, from the perspective of fan studies, calling it “imagination-oriented aesthetic.” In the wake of Bourdieu’s work, Kacsuk conceptualizes fan creation as a new aesthetic disposition, which mixes the pure aesthetic disposition of detachment and self-reflexivity with the popular aesthetic disposition of affective engagement and precisely therefore gets denigrated from both sides. Whereas with respect to new fandoms in general and otaku culture in particular psychological and psychoanalytical accounts have predominated so far, Kacsuk argues the case for interrelating sociology and aesthetics.

By being conventional, affective, and affirmative, manga challenges critique, or to be precise, its traditional limitation to a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” From the perspective of visual arts education and under the heading of “post-critical pedagogy,” Paul Duncum has called on critique to engage with affective investments (240). Similar in kind, Rita Felski advocates postcritical readings: “Rather than looking behind the text – for its hidden causes, determinating conditions, and noxious motives – we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible.” Such orientation matches recent attempts within the study of manga, anime, light novels, or “media mix as adaption” to foreground texts against their dissolution in “popular culture” or “media ecology,” an attempt which is not rarely dismissed in the name of formalism or compliance with consumer capitalism. But instead of playing off contexts against texts, society against

aesthetics, political (intellectual) reason against affective (fannish) investment, as has happened so often in the name of critique by both advocates and adversaries of manga entertainment, it is high time to acknowledge the interrelatedness of these alleged counterparts. This again implies to conceptualize manga not as something beyond critique (and accordingly regard its actors as uncritical, not sophisticated, conformist people), but as a challenge to widen the very notion of critique, which this special issue is hoped to contribute to.

Notes

1. Cf. Magnussen et al. xvii-xviii and Berndt, *Manga: Medium, Art and Material* 15-27.
2. For a survey of Japan-based manga studies cf. Berndt 2014.
3. The biggest manga magazines are *Weekly Shōnen Jump* (Shūeisha, with a print-run of 2.7 million in 2013) and *Weekly Shōnen Magazine* (Kōdansha, 1.3 million), both targeted at boys, and the girl-oriented monthlies *Ciao* (Shōgakukan, 543.000) and *Bessatsu Margaret* (Shūeisha, 211.000).
4. Japanese words in the plural are used here without an “s.”
5. As distinct from other kinds of Japanese animation (which are highlighted in Hu & Yokota, eds.), anime has been distinguishing itself medium-wise by cel animation of the limited or selective kind, the cardinal role of voice actor and sound, and the format of the TV series.
6. See, for example, manga critics’ defense of sexual depictions created by women and for women against enhanced attempts at regulation since 2010, in contrast to the lesser attention paid to class-related, ethnic, and environmental issues.
7. Suffice to survey the manga-related talks at the Cultural Typhoon conferences.
8. Listed up in the entry “マンガ学科” (*manga gakka*) at ja.wikipedia.org.
9. Related intellectual-property infringements have been noted in the nitty-gritty of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and made the news since 2013.
10. In Japan, genres are first categorized by age and gender (i.e., manga for children, youth, adults, with a male or female orientation) and only second by theme (horror, sports, history, pachinko etc.).
11. This magazine by Shōgakukan had a print-run of 183,000 at the time.
12. Japanese names appear in the domestic order, i.e. surname preceding given name without separation by comma, except in the References and in the article by Selen Çalik.
13. According to Kinsella (82), *Oishinbo* “began as a ‘gourmet manga’ series about the joys of eating good food, but rapidly increased in popularity and topicality after focusing on the politics of US—Japan trade relations, during the period of the so-called ‘Rice war’ between Japanese and Californian farmers.” Brau maintains that the series is “both reaffirming traditional values and at the same time offering cultural critique” (45).
14. Cf. Asō, “Kokusai manga-shō hossoku ni yosete.”
15. Available online in Japanese, English, Chinese, and Korean.
16. Talks were delivered by the first three contributors to this special issue as well as myself.
17. Published in the French satirical magazine *Le Canard Enchaîné* in September 2013. Cf. Rear for a less culturalized background.
18. Cf. Gill, “Anti-nuclear agitprop art after 3.11.”
19. While *Kōno* would be the correct romanization, *Kouno* is the version used by the publisher of the English translation of her manga.

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