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Manga/Comics Studies from the perspective of Science Fiction research:

Genre, transmedia, and transnationalism

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Introduction

This essay was written based on my presentation at the conference "Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Scholarship on a Global Scale" held in Kyoto, Japan, in 2009.[1] Its primary objective is to "raise questions" about methodological issues and approaches to Manga Studies "within Japan". One of the conference's main themes was to internationalize Manga/Comics Studies by inviting Japanese and foreign scholars to undertake the centralized question: "whether it is possible to discuss comics beyond the scope of local comics cultures".[2] Bearing these fundamental thematics in mind, this essay first illustrates and compares the recent development of mainstream English-language Comics Studies and Japanese-language manga critical discourses. In doing so, I point out the achievements and problems in formalist and semiotic/structuralist approaches that distinctively emerged in the Comics Studies scene of the 1990s. Then, utilizing ideas taken from Science Fiction (SF) Studies—another field of popular culture studies—and genre theory, my essay will put forward a critical methodology that would complement the limitations of formalism in light of the

1 I am very thankful to Jaqueline Berndt, Kajiya Kenji, Nakagaki Kotarō, Ōgi Fusami, Kosaka Eliko, and Furuta Ayako for reading and giving useful comments on the draft of this essay. Also, it was very helpful to have a series of conversations via e-mail on the topic with Joseph Witek and Pascal Lefèvre. I am grateful to these scholars as well.

2 See the conference website: http://www.kyotomm.jp/english/event/study/isc01_e.php (last access: 10/07/2010)

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transnational circulation of comics/manga as well as the international scholarship that we are engaged in.

1. Beyond formalism

In the last two decades, the study of comics (or Comics Studies) has gradually formed and been established as an "academic discipline" in North American academia. And yet, it still remains in a "nascent" stage compared to other established disciplines due to confusion and contradictions regarding critical vocabulary, concepts, diction, and methodology employed by different researchers and theorists (Fischer and Hatfield 2009). As in Japan, before the study of comics became the subject of serious academic inquiry, numerous critical engagements of it were done mainly by non-academic critics and artists. In the history of English-language comics criticism, comic artists Will Eisner and Scott McCloud are pioneers. They have cultivated the field of Comics Studies. Above all, McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) was quite successful in stimulating a renewed interest in the comics medium, which consequently attracted more scholars and researchers from different disciplines to the scholarship of comics. In fact, in 1995, two years after the publication of McCloud's book, scholars and researchers in the U.S. initiated an annual conference called the International Comics Art Forum (ICAF). Another group, led by international comics scholar John Lent, started publishing a scholarly print journal *The International Journal of Comic Art* (IJCA) from 1999. Since then, North American and European researchers have also been active in online journals such as *ImageTexT* and *Image [&] Narrative.* One of the fruits of recent comics scholarship was *A Comics Studies Reader* published in 2009, which anthologizes several important scholarly articles on comics. In 2009, a discussion group called the "Comics and Graphic Narrative" was founded under the established literature and language organization, the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the members of this discussion group are currently planning their first panels for the 2011 MLA annual conference.

Accordingly, comic books have been introduced and used as school "textbooks" in grade school and university classrooms. In these educational institutions, along with traditional American comics, several graphic novels such as *Maus: A Survivor's*

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Tale, *Persepolis*, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, *American Born Chinese*, and *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* have become popular and "canonized" textbooks used by educators (Heer and Worcester 2009: xi). These comics have been used in a range of courses, including literature, American Studies, Ethnic Studies, art, journalism, film, and composition, suggesting that comics have sparked interest from diverse disciplinary perspectives.

Within Japan, paralleling the development of Comics Studies in North America, critical and intellectual studies on Japanese manga have also taken root.[3] Above all, the critical discourses on manga in the 1990s spearheaded the promotion of the importance of Manga Studies to the general public. Scholars and critics such as Yomota Inuhiko, Natsume Fusanosuke, and Takeuchi Osamu cultivated an approach called *hyōgenron* [theory on expression].[4] As Yomota remarks in his book *Manga genron* (1994), their approaches were, by and large, aimed at "examin[ing] the internal logic of what makes manga 'manga'" by analyzing the "system of expression that is unique to manga" (Yomota 1994: 15-17). Nearly simultaneously, Natsume and Takeuchi also published a series of books on manga, focusing on formal function, internal structure, and the meaning of discrete elements in the manga medium. Natsume's hyōgenron was motivated by his discontent with the previously dominant approach that, he claimed, tended to only discuss narrative themes or often treated manga merely as a reflection of the society or age out of which the comics emerge (Natsume 1992: 13-16, Natsume and Takekuma 1995). The hyōgenron approach was seminal as it enriched manga discourses by creatively providing a new set of vocabulary to discuss manga. It also claimed autonomy for the manga medium, differentiating it from textual and visual media. Some hyōgenron critics incorporated semiotic and structural approaches into the field of manga criticism.[5] Manga critic Itō Gō's book *Tezuka Is Dead* (2005)

3 For a brief history of Japanese manga criticism and different approaches among Japanese language scholarship, see Natsume and Takeuchi (2009); in English see Berndt (2008).

4 As acknowledged by some scholars, criticism on manga style (*hyōgen)* such as the works by Ishiko Junzō or other cultural critics existed prior to the emergence in the 1990s of manga hyōgenron. Manga hyōgenron, however, was unique and seminal enough to have a long-lasting impact on recent Manga Studies.

5 See, for instance, Natsume (1992) and *Manga no yomikata* (1995). Yomota (1994) is another example of a semiotic approach to the manga medium. However, it should be noted that manga hyōgenron is not limited to a narrow sense of formalism. Some hyōgenron theorists are

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was intended to continue and refine the hyōgenron approach while criticizing the fetishization of Tezuka by some manga critics.

The hyōgenron approach to Japanese Manga Studies is similar to a formalist or semiotic approach in North American or English-language Comic Studies.[6] Formalism is, as a rule, considered one of the critical methodologies–originating in literary, music, and art criticism–to analyze internal characteristics of formal features such as rhyme, metaphor, grammar, structure, rhetoric, and trope in literary formalism. In the field of literary criticism, formalism had a strong connection with the school of New Criticism that emerged in the early twentieth century. New Critics disclaimed the romanticized idea of a "genius" that was regarded as the ultimate origin of a work and also left established social and historical approaches out of consideration by claiming the autonomy of a literary "text". The Japanese hyōgenron that became viable in 1990s manga criticism employed a similarly formalist methodology by discounting the primacy of authorship (*sakkasei*) or the cartoonist's philosophy (*shisōsei*) (Natsume 1992: 13-14), just as Scott McCloud, at nearly the same time, published *Understanding Comics*, in which he divorces "form" from "content" in analyzing the comics medium.[7]

Formalist and semiotic/structuralist approaches seem to provide a dialogical space in which international scholars can discuss comics/manga regardless of national or cultural origins because, according to them, the structure of comics can be dissected into smaller composites such as images, words, word balloons, spaces, gutters, and

interested in other aspects of the comics medium such as the materiality of comic production and ergonomics (i.e. what kind of writing pens and papers are used to draw manga and how they function with movements of the human body). In particular, Natsume's recent writings (such as Natsume 2004) show flexible approaches, critical reflection of his previous methodology, and a strong will to create dialogue with other disciplinary inquiries. Similarly, McCloud, whose approach is usually associated with formalism, uses Marshall McLuhan's media theory and Gestalt psychology.

6 In the "Afterword" for the bunko paperback edition (1999) of *Manga genron*, Yomota Inuhiko explicitly remarks that he uses semiotic structuralism, adopting especially its "synchronic" approach (Yomota 1999: 388-389).

7 The rise of the hyōgenron approach in manga criticism in the 1990s seems to coincide with the emergence of formalism in North America. Along with McCloud's book, the increasing interest in comics has perhaps come from a substantial interest in visual and pictorial media in the Western humanities, which W. J. T. Mitchell calls the "pictorial turn". On the other hand, in Japan, the rise of hyōgenron was triggered by the renewed interest in the manga medium immediately after the death of Tezuka Osamu in 1989, who is now mythologized as the "God of Manga".

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sequentiality, that, in turn, can be analyzed or examined. In fact, taking cues from formalists coming from different national contexts such as McCloud and Natsume, comics scholar Neil Cohen discusses the dominant style of postwar Japanese manga, which he calls “Japanese Visual Language (JVL)” (Cohen 2010: 187-191), by using statistics and comparing it with typical American comics.[8]

However, it would be reductive to ascribe a certain function or meaning to form in and of itself. Because comics/manga is a socio-cultural object, it is always exposed to a multiplicity of readings.[9] Readers are integral agents who play major roles in the production of meaning and the function of a text. As such, readers (as well as cartoonists) historically stand in differently situated social, cultural, and ideological positions. This also means that semantic and functional elements are dependent on the external circumstances outside of the comics/manga form. To illustrate this problematic nature of formalism, let me elaborate using McCloud’s so-called “identification theory” as an example. In his *Understanding Comics*, he proposes that the “iconic” (or cartoony) and abstract depiction of face or character encourages the identification of the reader with that character in contrast to the realistic depiction of background. To make this point, he uses the example of Japanese manga style by claiming it is a Japanese “national style” (McCloud 1994: 43). McCloud goes so far as to say that, with this simple, abstract style, we, the readers of comics/manga, “don’t just observe the cartoon; we become it!” (McCloud 1994: 36). His identification theory seems appealing and might be “intuitively understandable” to those who are familiar with the typical postwar manga style. However, it should be noted here that this theory needs careful examination before it is applied universally to readings of comics/manga. In “Identification in Comics”, which critically examines McCloud’s identification theory,

8 It seems problematic to me to assume that the “stereotypical big eyes, big hair, small mouth, and pointed chins of characters in manga” (Cohen 2010: 188) are something particular to “Japanese” manga style (JVL), because the dominance of such a style is the product of cultural hybridity in Japan’s modern and postwar period. It is not difficult to point out the characteristic similarities between Tezuka’s typical characters and those of Disney. Also, as Cohen acknowledged later, manga style “changes over time” (2010: 189), which suggests the historical contingency of certain formal features and functions.

9 This never means that a reader can read/create a “text” at his or her discretion. A reader (or a writer) is always and already situated and restricted by convention, codes, and ideology through which he or she creates a text. In other words, a reader (as well as a writer) is not the ultimate, transcendental “origin” of comics.

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Ethan Frome discreetly re-considers the nuanced meaning of identification by stating that "[i]dentification is not about losing yourself to a character, but about expanding your identity to include the character", and it is "best understood as the conscious or unconscious decision to care about a character's welfare as if it were your [our] own" (Frome 1999: 86). If such is the case, identification is not merely a function of form but also a mixed effect of forms and other non-formal aspects of comics/manga (i.e. plot, themes, and narratives, etc.) as well as external cultural values, conventions, and socio-historical and ideological matrices.

In addition, according to Noda Kensuke, Japanese translator of Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*, the major formalists who appeared on the scene of comics/manga criticism in the 1990s had their respective and normative "artists" in mind when constructing their theories.[10] As examples, Noda named the mainstream artists in each national context: Tezuka for Japan, Hergé for France, Kirby and Eisner for America. In this respect, the 1990s formalist comics discourses were not so much descriptive as they were prescriptive and, perhaps, even normative. In the case of Japanese manga criticism, the hyōgenron theorists favored the works of Tezuka or other mainstream postwar *mangaka* (cartoonists). In that process, they tended to celebrate the "craftsmanship" (or "mastery") of what is expressed (*hyōgen*) in the manga medium as proof of the unique talents of cartoonists. Paradoxically, hyōgenron evoked again a romanticized idea of "artists" while being engaged with a formalist take on the medium. In view of this, Jaqueline Berndt is right in stating that "manga hyōgenron unwittingly inherited the modern notion of art with its claim of autonomy despite the pursuit of analyses of form that is unique to the manga medium" (Berndt 2010: 19-20).

What is more, the formalist approach tends to downplay the interest in comics as a site for cultural negotiation. Such an attitude might also diminish questions concerning the implications of media, ideology, and social power. In this regard, it is no coincidence that Media Studies scholar Uryū Yoshimitsu, when criticizing

10 Noda Kensuke: "Nichi futsu bei manga riron no hikaku kanōsei ni tsuite [How to Compare Japanese, French and American Comics Theory]", paper given at the First International Conference: Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Scholarship on a Global Scale, Kyoto, Japan (December 18-20, 2009). English translation of abstract: http://www.kyotomm.jp/english/andmore/isc01_e_detail.php#01work (last access: 2010/07/10).

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the hyōgenron approach, cites the critical works of Ishiko Junzō, who was active in manga criticism before the 1990s rise of hyōgenron (Uryū 2000: 131-132). Informed by leftist thinking, Ishiko's manga criticism paid attention to both form and medium as social objects. Ishiko's concern with manga was located in the "inseparable relationship of the function or characteristics of the medium itself" (Ishiko 1994: 9). He underscored the analyses of form and content *in relation* to different forms of media such as newspapers, journals, and books, and physical locations such as rental bookshops (*kashihon-ya*).[11] To use Uryū's own words, Ishiko's approach was intended "to foreground 'the way of communication by the medium of manga' by examining the 'site' of drawing/reading manga" (Uryū 2000: 131). Concerns regarding the "sites" that Ishiko repeatedly highlighted in his writing and the question of what kind of cultural and political negotiations are conducted through the manga medium should be (re-)considered if the "tendencies of an apolitical approach to manga still prevail in Japanese manga criticism" (Berndt 2008: 305).

Be that as it may, in all fairness to hyōgenron or formalists that appeared in 1990s Comics Studies, their approaches might have been instances of procedural tactics meant to legitimize manga/comics as a "unique medium" different from other visual or textual media, an object of serious and/or academic inquiry, or even part of "art". In addition to this, a specific methodological inquiry is feasible by intentionally disregarding other possible approaches. The 1990s formalists deliberately withdrew their attention from considering historical or diachronic perspectives. In this regard, they followed the same methodological procedure as Thierry Groensteen did in his *The System of Comics* for a "new semiology of comics" (Groensteen 2007: 1-2).[12]

2. From the perspective of SF Studies

To consider further the methodological questions regarding Manga Studies, I would like to utilize SF genre theory and Japanese postwar SF as examples to illustrate what is left unconsidered. Historically, the development of Japanese SF was closely related

11 For a response to Uryū's criticism, see Natsume (2003 and 2004).

12 In the introduction of his book, Groensteen declares that "comics will be considered here as a language, that is to say, not as a historical, sociological, or economic phenomena [*sic*], which it is also, but as an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning" (Groensteen 2007: 2).

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to the socio-historical condition as well as to the postwar development of manga. The following often-quoted passage in the Japanese SF field figuratively depicts the historical development of postwar Japanese SF, comparing it to space exploration and the building of civilization.

> The planet SF was found in the Tezuka Osamu galaxy in the manga nebula. Captain Hoshi Shinichi on a spaceship investigated it first. Then supervisors such as Yano Tetsu and Shibano Takumi trained and sent new colonial settlers to it; then, pilot, Mitsuse Ryū, landed on the planet; engineer, Fukushima Masami, created the blueprints by conducting a location survey of the geography; bulldozer Komatsu Sakyō cleared the ground; Mayuzumi Taku trains carried the materials, and a Ishikawa Takashi newspaper was issued; liquor store Hanmura Ryō was opened; and Tsutsui Yasutaka started driving around a sports car [...] (Komatsu 2002: 98-99).

While enumerating the names of the major Japanese writers who established SF as a distinctive genre in postwar Japanese popular culture, this passage also illustrates the importance of Tezuka Osamu and his influence through the manga media on later SF writers. It is well known that cartoonists such as Tezuka Osamu and SF writers interacted through their editors, writers' clubs, and SF conventions. Moreover, one of the postwar SF giants, Komatsu Sakyō, used to create manga sometimes under the pseudonym "Komatsu Minoru" when he was a college student at Kyoto University (Komatsu 2002). Also, Tsutsui Yasutaka, one of the "three influential giants" (*gosanke*) of Japanese SF, contributed his manga to the postwar boys' magazine *Manga Shōnen* (Tsuitsui 2004). These writers, who laid the foundation for postwar Japanese SF, were the avid readers of prewar and wartime manga and "imaginary scientific novels" (*kūsōkagaku shōsetsu*) through which they nurtured their SF imagination as children. In *Sengo SF mangashi* (The History of Postwar SF Manga), manga critic Yonezawa Yoshihiro, who is also known as a co-founder of *Comiket*, remarks that "Tezuka Osamu and SF manga made up for the 15-year blank period from the prewar SF adventure stories by Oshikawa Shunrō and Unno Jūza to the emergence of Japanese [postwar] SF

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writers" (Yonezawa 2008: 14). If Yonezawa is right, SF imagination survived through different media—books, magazines, journals, *kashihon* (rental manga), *kamishibai* (paper theater), SF *e-monogatari* (SF picture stories), and manga books—until it created its own genre in the postwar period.[13] The historical development of Japanese SF and its transmediality suggest the significance of studying multiple forms of conterminous media.

The development of postwar Japanese SF was also deeply linked with the socio-historical condition of Japan during the Occupation Period. There were economic, historical, and political reasons behind the instant rise of the SF genre in manga after the defeat of Japan. First, cost-efficient media such as *kamishibai* and *kashihon* were used for major mass-produced forms of entertainment in this time of material shortage. Second, during the occupation of Japan, the GHQ-directed censorship prohibited period pieces (*jidaimono*) and any cultural production featuring Japanese martial arts such as *kendō* and *judō* because they were thought to emphasize "feudalistic values" (ergo, Japanese militarism) while encouraging democratic ideals. Yonezawa also remarks that "it was perhaps only the SF genre that was able to narrate adventure stories [appealing to children] while espousing world peace and democracy" (Yonezawa 2008: 54). In other words, these economic and political *restrictions* enabled *certain expressions* (hyōgen). As a result, SF has become a distinctively conspicuous genre along with fantasy in postwar Japanese popular culture.[14]

Generally, SF is considered and categorized "genre fiction" along with fantasy, horror, and detective fiction. Although genre is a categorizing concept usually based on a particular style, form, or content of works, its definition is always exposed to a taxonomical conundrum as with the case of defining comics. To put it simply, there is no consensus regarding the definition of "manga" or "literary genre" because definitions are often overlapping and there always exist heterogeneous exceptions against any definitive statement to define a genre. Against this general concept, American SF writer

13 I should add that the immense introduction and consumption of American and European SF played a major role in laying the foundation for the later development of Japanese SF.

14 Frederik L. Schodt remarks that "they [postwar Japanese manga artists] had to work in totally new genres with different story lines to avoid American censorship. It is no coincidence that in the immediate postwar years, science-fiction manga, Tarzan tales, and American Westerns were particularly popular" (Schodt 2007: 32).

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and critic Samuel R. Delany proposes another way of conceptualizing genre. He claims that genre is a "protocol" (Delany 1980: 176), a way of reading that guides a reader's consumption of a text.[15] For instance, in reading poetry, an experienced reader pays more attention to rhythms and rhymes; in reading drama, the reader does the same to the tension and conflicts among characters; and in reading SF, the reader is more conscious of how a fictional world is different from our world. Like this, genres offer readers' different ways of reading. To put it differently, each fictional genre directs and commands its own way of reading, and the reader, who is aware of the implicit reading convention of the genre, participates in the production of meaning and text. To use Delany's example, the sentence, "her world exploded", can be interpreted as figurative to a reader of realist novels, but it might carry a literal meaning to a SF reader—that is, a woman possesses a world by some means and her world literally explodes. In short, genre for Delany is not merely defined by contents and themes, but contains a performative function that guides and regulates how it is read. In addition, according to literary critic Nancy Ellen Batty, Delany recurrently argues that genre is also an "interactive community of writers, readers, editors, illustrators, and collectors" (Batty 2003: 19), because genre as a reading protocol is shared and maintained by readers as well as challenged and reconfigured by writers and others.

Delany's conceptualization of genre can be applied to manga/comics in terms of the way in which the reading protocols, historically established by manga/comics, are shared, maintained, and negotiated by an interactive community of participants. It should be noted that genre here means a whole complex set of codes, structures, and expectations that participants in comics/manga culture utilize in their interactions with the comics/manga medium. In contrast, "genres in manga/comics" such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, sports, superhero, etc. constitute another subset of protocols which are respectively autonomous, but often overlapping structures. While the genres in manga/comics are relatively recognizable and so marketed, Delany's conception of

15 Samuel R. Delany has, among other things, a strong interest in comics. In his detailed essay "The Politics of Paraliterature" (1999), he celebrates and criticizes Scott McCloud's project on comics. For Delany, comics are, along with genre fiction, fantasy, mystery, pulp fiction, and pornography, "paraliterature", which is marginalized and even ostracized from the legitimized status of "Literature" with a capital L. He politicizes paraliterature as a moment to destabilize the established view on Literature.

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genre reminds us of the existence of the naturalized, therefore, often invisible "filters" through which we read manga/comics.

In other words, to "be able to read manga" or to "understand manga" indicates that the reader has already learned the reading protocol of manga that has been historically constructed, accumulated, and shared. This also suggests that manga, as a socially shared medium, continuously produces and updates the reading subject who has a high literacy of reading manga; and as a shared reality, manga as a social medium also constitutes a reading community. The previously quoted statement—to be "intuitively understandable"—is a response from the reader who is familiar enough with and naturalized to the convention of reading manga. If such "transparency" of meaning is only guaranteed by a convention, it is neither natural nor self-evident for *other* communities that do not share that convention. Historically, such communities are often demarcated not only by nation and culture but also by gender, ethnicity, class, generation, and "taste". No matter how clear a typical manga expression seems to well-trained readers of Japanese manga, it can be very opaque and uncertain to the reader who has no shared reading protocol of Japanese manga.[16]

3. In the transnational circulation of manga

It is more important to consider the above-mentioned point in light of the current globalization of manga/comics. As frequently mentioned, Japanese popular culture—representatively, anime, manga, and J-pop—has gained international popularity in recent decades. Within Japan, the global popularity of Japanese popular culture is also widely known and, at times, disseminated through mass media and often discussed by critics in regards to its "soft power" (Nye 2004: ix-xiii) and/or its connection to issues of cultural particularities (or the concept of "Japaneseness").[17] Yet, outside

16 It can be unclear for those who don't share the reading protocol of postwar manga, for instance, to read a manga character who closes his eyes and has a bubble coming from his nose as "sleeping" and to understand a depiction of a man whose nose is bleeding as "sexually excited".

17 Jaqueline Berndt also points out this tendency among Japanese academics in her essay, *Gurōbaruka suru manga* (2010), in reference to recent Japanese-language scholarship. Some English-language scholarship, such as Iwabuchi Kōichi's *Recentering Globalization*, follows the same pattern by articulating Japaneseness in the transnational circulation of Japanese popular culture.

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of Japan, particularly in the United States, Japanese popular culture still occupies a marginal, subcultural space compared to mainstream American culture. As an industry, it therefore remains a niche market. In addition, it should be noted that the patterns of global reception and consumption of Japanese popular culture are never monolithic and homogeneous. Even within the subcultural community of Japanese popular culture overseas, there is a complex heterogeneity in audience, generation, and communities. In the U.S. context, Japanese popular culture tends to appeal more to youth, and it seems important for them to embrace *subcultural differences* from the mainstream or dominant popular culture, which Japanese popular culture provides in its forms, styles, narratives, and value systems through a popular medium. This subcultural location of the globalized Japanese popular culture also offers an alternative space, often for the alienated youth, to avoid and disavow or resist a normative and mainstream culture.[18]

Additionally, in the global context, Japanese manga, generally considered within Japan a medium that comes in a wide variety of genres and styles, frequently behaves like a distinctive "genre"—often written as "MANGA" in English-speaking countries—as part of the larger category of comics. The same condition can be observed in the case of Japanese anime, a contiguous medium of manga. In the United States, the word "ANIME" is often juxtaposed with other generic names such as Science Fiction, drama, and horror at rental video/DVD stores. In her *God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post-World War II Manga,* Onoda Natsu Power points out that manga is regarded as "certain genres of Japanese comics that the U.S. publishers have chosen to translate and publish, characterized by particular pictorial styles and character design" (Power 2009: 6) and in the U.S. context it functions as "a new genre of story comics" (Power 2009: 11). If such is the case, manga in this global context performs like a genre which, as Delany says, constitutes a number of readers who share a new set of reading protocols of manga and, in doing so, they form a community through the manga medium.

Considering manga's increasingly transnational position, what kind of approach

18 See Napier (2007), particularly the section "A Composite Fan Portrait", where she introduces a female American anime fan who found a psychological "escape outlet" (Napier 2007: 145) in Japanese anime that enabled her to escape familial trouble that might have lead her to suicide.

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can be beneficial and constructive for international scholarly conversation? Although there may be many ways to answer this question, I would like to briefly introduce an approach that comes out of recent Comics Studies. It is an essay entitled “The Arrow and the Grid”, written by comics scholar Joseph Witek for the above-mentioned *A Comics Studies Reader*. In this essay, he demonstrates what Pascal Lefèvre calls “historicized formalism”.[19] In contrast to a typical formalist analysis that often looks for the “irreductive essence of ‘comicsness’” (Witek 2009: 149), Joseph Witek historicizes the naturalizing process of how comics are read and examines the patterns of narrative construction and sequentiality in early twentieth century American comic strips. He pays attention to the numbering of panels and the directional arrows that supposedly guide the reader’s navigation of the comics strips. According to Witek, the numbering of panels and the directional arrows—which seem unnecessary to contemporary readers—suggest the “fossilized holdovers” (Witek 2009: 150) of the past in which the reading protocols of comics were, in fact, unfamiliar and sometimes confusing to the readers. By revealing both the historical process of normalizing the formal functions and the reading protocol to the readers, Witek states that the formal features in earlier comic strips indicate the “traces of the process by which the Western comics reader has been constructed” and these formal devices reveal “the path still trod by readers and creators alike” (Witek 2009: 155). Witek’s essay points to the historical contingency of formal features and functions. In other words, the reading protocols of the comics (and, of course, manga) medium have been constantly changed, revised, and adjusted through a series of dialogues between readers and creators while implicitly educating and constituting the readers who have advanced the literacy of reading comics/manga.

This methodology also carries with it the potential to suggest that formalism and an historical approach are not so much mutually exclusive as they are complementary to each other. While providing an account of an analytic description of formal elements

19 I learned about this methodology in the e-mail exchanges with Joseph Witek and Pascal Lefèvre. In his e-mail to me, Pascal Lefèvre mentions that he used it in his essay “The Conquest of Space: Evolution of Panel Arrangements and Page Lay Outs in Early Comics” anthologized in *European Comic Art*. Lefèvre also suggested that he took a cue for this approach from film scholar David Bordwell’s analysis of cinema. (Joseph Witek, 25/01/2010: “Re: Your MLA Presentation”. Email to the author; and Pascal Lefèvre,13/04/2010: “Re: Kyoto manga conference [last Dec]”. E-mail to the author.)

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and internal structure, it also pays a lot of attention to the socio-cultural condition from which comics are produced and consumed. As long as comics exist as socio-cultural and historical objects, it is impossible to separate an analysis of formal function from its context. It is necessary to (re-)consider the history of comics in relation to society, culture, institutions, industry, and a variety of media without narrowly limiting our approaches to the intrinsic structure of the comics medium.

4. Conclusion: Cultural politics of comics/manga

Given that comics/manga are not merely a commodity to be consumed or enjoyed as entertainment but also a medium, hence, a form of communication, they are also a social, historical, and cultural object. Without doubt, formalism or semiotic/structuralist approaches that claimed the "autonomy of comics" cultivated the field of Comics Studies by enriching the critical vocabulary used to discuss this medium and perhaps contributed largely to Comics Studies establishing itself as an academic discipline. However, it is also true that these approaches tended to avoid examining the problematic nexus of culture and power. Comics exist not only for academic inquiry but also for the people who experience them as part of their everyday life. Their interactions with comics/manga are deeply related to culture, history, ideology, and social power. From his neo-Gramscian perspective, cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner states one of the objectives of studying popular culture:

> Popular culture is a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic—that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice—it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus reveal the configurations of interests its construction serves. (Turner 2002: 5)

This perspective of cultural politics is to be remembered and/or (re-)incorporated in the critical discourses of Comics/Manga Studies, particularly at the moment of conducting and promoting an international conversation about this media in the current transnational condition, in which comics/manga constantly create and recreate different

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readers and constitute communities. It is beneficial for Manga/Comics Studies to undo and re-situate the "autonomy" of comics in the multiple interlocked relationships of readership, history, economy, and ideology in order to re-theorize it as a "site" for competition, mediation, and negotiation of social, cultural, economic, and political powers. To critically examine the implications of the cultural politics of the comics/ manga medium is part of our task as scholars with social responsibility in the field of Comics Studies.

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