



Mark W. MacWilliams, ed., *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*

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GROWING international interest in Japanese *manga* and *anime* has been matched by a prodigious and increasingly sophisticated academic literature. Nevertheless, apologetic fan commentary has sometimes excessively influenced otherwise rigorous scholarship, and an academic preference for the works of a handful of renowned artists and directors has resulted in neglect of the equally stimulating

oeuvres of less prominent figures. Scholars have also preferred narrative analyses to examinations of aesthetic composition and have hitherto largely neglected the study of *shōjo* (girls') *manga*. The field is therefore ripe for a serious methodological intervention.

This book makes such a contribution through an introductory overview of the state of the field by editor Mark MacWilliams and a sterling concluding chapter by Jaqueline Berndt, both of which are required reading for scholars and students interested in these influential media. Two timely chapters on *shōjo manga* by Mizuki Takahashi and Deborah Shamoan provide a welcome focus on visual composition. Other chapters survey the historical development of *manga* and *anime*, examine themes related to war and religion, and consider how *anime* reflect or create Japanese identity.

The book opens with chapters by Kinko Ito and Gilles Poitras that trace the historical development of *manga* and *anime*. While helpfully recognizing the influences of American and European comics and cinema on these media, both suggest that *manga* and *anime* are essentially different from their Western counterparts. However, the persuasiveness of this argument—which initially emerged from apologetic justifications for studying these media—is waning as the production and consumption of *manga* and *anime* internationalize. Furthermore, while Ito and Rajyashree Pandey trace *manga* to premodern media such as *emaki* (picture scrolls), such historical connections are tenuous due to significant differences in authorial intent and audience reception, and divergent modes of production and distribution. Similarly, Pandey and Lee Makela may overestimate the influence of reified versions of Buddhism and Shinto on modern *manga* artists.

Although “god of *manga*” Tezuka Osamu’s influence has been somewhat inflated in foregoing scholarship, Susanne Phillipps’ helpful overview of his oeuvre corroborates other authors’ arguments about historical developments in style. For example, whereas Tezuka has often been credited with single-handedly creating postwar stylistic conventions, Takahashi’s chapter highlights significant innovations pioneered by the authors of *shōjo manga*, including the creative use of panels and transitions to draw attention to characters’ internal emotional states. Shamoan elaborates, suggesting that recent *shōjo manga* have dispensed with florid depictions of starry-eyed characters in favor of “flattened,” relatively realistic portrayals that nevertheless maintain *shōjo* narrative themes of interiority and sameness. Furthermore, the chapter extricates portrayals of same-sex love in *shōjo manga* from misleading associations with gay and lesbian identity, making it indispensable reading for anyone interested in themes of sex and gender in *manga*.

Other chapters use *manga* and *anime* as a means of apprehending the *zeitgeist* of a particular era. Yulia Mikhailova’s chapter examines satirical cartoons from the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), providing a welcome diversion from other chapters’ focus on narrative *manga*, and expanding the book’s scope. Chapters by Makela and Eldad Nakar respectively demonstrate how themes like robots and war in *anime* and *manga* reflect shifting historical and cultural circumstances.

Richard Gardner’s chapter elucidates the complicated relationship between Aum Shinrikyō (the group that released sarin gas on the Tokyo subway in 1995) and

manga and *anime*, emphasizing how Aum's terrorism resulted in a media uproar about the ostensibly pernicious nature of these media. The chapter also demonstrates that Aum used *manga* and *anime* as inspirations for doctrinal innovation, but Gardner resists the notion that fictive media were responsible for Aum members' ostensible delusion. Hiroshi Yamanaka and Shiro Yoshioka each write on the films of Miyazaki Hayao, arguing that they contribute to the construction of Japanese identity through a broadly palatable spirituality (Yamanaka) or nostalgia (Yoshioka). While both chapters highlight aspects of Miyazaki's work that have led to its unmitigated domestic and international success, Miyazaki's attitudes towards "spirituality" and Japaneseness are inherently inconsistent, and audience responses to his works vary more than these authors suggest. Melek Ortabasi's chapter, which ties *otaku* (geek) subculture to national identity in Kon Satoshi's *anime*, demonstrates that the hitherto marginalized *otaku* subculture has garnered a degree of legitimacy by claiming authority over a certain type of national nostalgia while simultaneously representing Japan's "soft power" abroad.

The foregoing critiques of the various chapters largely echo Berndt's stimulating discussion in the concluding chapter. To these I would like to add one general point on method. The common observation that most Japanese people read *manga* or watch *anime* often leads to the unwarranted presupposition that they all read or watch them in the same way. Specific products are targeted to specific audiences, and authorial intent rarely directly corresponds with audience reception. Using interviews and surveys to ask audience members how they interpret a particular product (a method rarely employed by these authors) is an efficient and verifiable—if not necessarily infallible—way of assessing the reception and influence of a particular work.

Finally, several essays include basic factual errors or mistranslations. As two examples from a longer list, Makela avers that Japanese does not include gendered pronouns (103) and Mikhailova states that the comic art of the early- and middle-Edo period was not socially or politically satirical (157). While the book is a valuable pedagogical resource, instructors should read carefully prior to assigning its chapters to forestall misapprehension of basic information.

Japanese Visual Culture deserves praise for its broad historical framework and its diverse disciplinary approaches. It expands discussion beyond auteur theory while significantly contributing to scholarship on influential artists and directors and their works. Although the chapters are inconsistent in their fidelity to its welcome methodological reflections, collectively they will fructify future research in this nascent and exciting field.

Jolyon Baraka THOMAS
Princeton University