

Comics and the Origins of Manga: A Revisionist History, Eike Exner (Rutgers, 2021)

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1. Introduction

Doing the history of comics is perilously difficult. While comics (or at least *some* comics) now enjoy unprecedented cultural cache, their present standing does nothing to remedy previously low cultural status and intentionally ephemeral production practices. Thankfully, a number of brave souls have labored long and carefully to provide us with a useful grip on the emergence and development of comics in Western Europe and North America. Obviously, such efforts were never going to supply us with a comprehensive history of comics, but with the ascendent popularity of manga, substantial ignorance regarding manga's history has never been more conspicuous nor have questions about the relationship between manga and other comics traditions ever been more urgent.

Eike Exner's efforts in this book are both timely and remarkable. Exner carefully explores the development of manga and its changing status through the 1890s and up through the 1930s. At each turn, Exner looks both forwards to the form of contemporary manga and backwards to preceding Japanese print traditions. Taking aim at historical accounts which posit contemporary manga as nothing more than the present incarnation of an isolated, centuries-long, and essentially Japanese artistic tradition, Exner forcefully argues that

[C]ontemporary manga and other audiovisual comics are in fact one and the same medium and did not emerge from mutually alien traditions, as far too many histories of manga and comics would have one believe. (178)

Exner's case against viewing manga as a hermetically sealed tradition draws on close readings of the narrative and formal elements of early Japanese cartoonists such as Imaizumi Ippyo, Kitazawa Rakuten, and Okamoto Ippei as well as a detailed examination of the adaptation and reception of George McManus' *Bringing Up Father* and other foreign strips throughout the 1920s. Exner then explores the influence of the latter on the subsequent production and popularity of comics strips by Japanese cartoonists.

As Exner notes, the motivations for positing a culturally isolated lineage between Japanese print traditions and contemporary manga are complex. Cultural prestige, public interest, and nationalist sentiment are only three of many factors that have sustained questionable manga historiography. When broaching these issues, Exner is a subtle and convincing commentator. Better still, he is capable of sifting through a complex visual record with an eye towards salient detail. The result is a watershed contribution to comics studies that is mandatory reading for scholars interested in manga and its history. In what follows, I offer a rough sketch of Exner's efforts and then examine a striking conjecture about the nature of comics that emerges in this book: the historical dependence of contemporary comics upon the invention of the phonograph.

2. Overview

Given the limited historical scholarship on manga available in English, a separate overview of the economic context, material production, or narrative trends of manga's emergence would be terribly useful. It is an evident strength of Exner's book that he is attentive to each of these and many other dimensions of manga, regularly observing important narrative developments (e.g., recurrent characters, use of anthropomorphism), formal innovations (e.g., layout and ordering conventions, generic styles), and professional developments among creators. In addition to supplying a vivid sense of the manga "industry" in the periods under study, Exner's observations are sure to spark productive historical interest into lesser-known works and creators involved in the importation and transformation of comics in Japan. The attentive reader is sure to leave this book terribly curious about a previously unknown figure, puzzled by the specific reception of this or that American strip, or desperate for a translation of one of the many Japanese texts Exner draws upon.

Exner sets out the ambitions for the book and a summative interrogation of competing histories of manga in the introduction and epilogue, respectively. A prologue charts some of the terminological history regarding manga and serves as a crucial tool for evaluating the impact of imported American strips upon the Japanese comics tradition. Like any good historian, Exner is eager to welcome others along to dig deeper into the questions with which he is concerned. A useful appendix lists foreign comics printed in Japan between 1908-1945, and, at several points throughout the book, Exner makes clear that much more remains to be discovered regarding this fecund era in comics history.

The first of the four main chapters discusses the production and reception of *Bringing up Father*, beginning in 1923 and running for seventeen consecutive years in the *Asahi Graph*. Exner scrutinizes the varying adaptation strategies in early installments that sought to bridge the reading practices of American creators with those of Japanese audiences—most notably, with regard to panel order and speech balloon orientation. As Exner notes elsewhere, the reprinting of foreign strips outside of copyright was a widespread phenomenon. Questions about why *Asahi Graph* editor in chief Suzuki Bunshiro seized upon McManus' work and what role printing rights played in this choice are potentially productive and usefully specific questions that one might now explore further given Exner's pioneering work.

Chapter Two is, in some ways, a detour from the main aims of the book. It offers a theory of the narrative and formal function of speech balloons, drawing from several episodes in non-Japanese comics. I examine Exner's theory below, but the historiographic rationale for this chapter is that the emergence of what Exner calls "audiovisual comics"—roughly, comics that feature speech balloons and other *emanata*—is historically specific to the Western comics idiom. The absence of audiovisual comics from the Japanese print tradition, despite the presence of sequential graphic storytelling is subsequently marshalled as evidence of the impact of American comics' importation. In particular, the adoption of speech balloons in contemporary manga is argued to be dependent upon their deployment in strips like *Bringing Up Father* in the 1920s.

In Chapter Three, Exner surveys the broader landscape of imported comics strips and examines trends that follow upon the distinctive reception of audiovisual strips. The continuing challenge of translation and competing practical and formal responses are examined. Exner also takes up the material question of how exactly the adaptation and reprinting was undertaken by Japanese periodicals. Additionally, the significance of editorial choices by figures like Inui

Shin'ichiro and the role of comics-oriented periodicals like *Shinseinen* and *Manga Man* are discussed, especially as sites for innovation by Japanese cartoonists.

Chapter Four supplies a partial account of “fully audiovisual” manga created by Japanese *mangaka*. Exner charts the path of several creators from the period preceding the importation of foreign strips to an increasingly mature manga industry, one driven by audience enthusiasm for speech balloon-laden narrative rather than pre-1920s picture stories. Touching upon the formative influence of imported strips on Osamu Tezuka, Exner sketches a rough proposal for credibly explaining the subsequent divergences regarding style and transdiegetic elements between the manga tradition and foreign comics. Notably, this sketch leaves aside any controversial claims about the availability and impact of foreign comics throughout World War II. Much like those who invariably point to *Japanese Punch* and the British satirical tradition in framing the history of manga, those who place undue weight on anecdotes about the discarded comics of American G.I.s will find Exner’s observations an important corrective.

3. Exner on Speech Balloons

If one hopes to provide a historical account of the emergence of contemporary or what Exner calls “audiovisual” manga, a theory of what makes manga contemporary and, in particular, what separates contemporary manga from its precursors is needed. For Exner, the principal divide between contemporary manga and preceding comic strips is the presence of transdiegetic elements—most notably, the speech balloon. And, as Exner argues, this innovation stems from the importation of foreign strips. As he puts it, “most significant change in narrative manga brought about by the translation of American comics was this shift from picture story to audiovisual comic strip.” (165) This historical argument can be mounted with fairly modest assumptions about the nature of speech balloons and their history outside of manga. But, in Chapter Two Exner departs from the history of manga, narrowly conceived, to develop a theory of the function of speech balloons as well as their historical origin. Exner builds upon previous work by Thierry Smolderen here, but the result is a distinctive proposal sure to be of interest to anyone concerned with how comics work.

Exner’s theory of speech balloons comprises a taxonomic proposal, a functional thesis, and a historical hypothesis. The taxonomic proposal distinguishes speech balloons as *transdiegetic* elements of the comics form. Unlike the *intradiegetic* text that appears on objects like signs and clothing within the narrative world of a comic, speech balloons themselves are unseeable by characters. But, unlike other unseeable *extradiegetic* elements (e.g., box narration, panel borders), speech balloons also impact the narrative world by conveying dialogue that characters might hear. Given their peculiar role, Exner takes them to be most aptly described as hybrid, transdiegetic elements.

There are alternative taxonomies we might adopt regarding the visual technology of comics, but it is a virtue of Exner’s account that it makes apparent the peculiarity of speech balloons. And, within this taxonomy, there is room for competing views about how exactly speech balloons serve their transdiegetic function. According to Exner, speech balloons are basically depictive entities, functioning as sound images. There is, however, reason to be cautious about assuming the sound image view or something like it.

Suppose, for example, a comic includes a speech balloon with internal text reading “I am.” Suppose that a subsequent reprint of the comic revises this text to read “Eye yam.” Such a change is a substantive (and presumably illicit) alteration to the comic precisely because speech balloons convey more than sonic information. They present us with *interpreted* sonic information, which discriminates between sonically equivalent events on the basis of the semantic content of speech. For this reason, speech balloons prove even weirder than Exner acknowledges: they must convey information, not only about what sounds are made, but what is *meant* through the production of sounds. We should, for this reason, view speech balloons as more like pictures of speech acts than as pictures of uninterpreted sonic events.

Exner’s historical hypothesis binds the history of speech balloons to the history of sound-recording technology, asserting that “audiovisual comics developed in response to new conceptions and technologies of vision and hearing... with the invention and spread of the phonograph being particular essential to the creation of audiovisual comics.” (175) Exner holds this connection to be far from accidental, claiming that speech balloons are more or less unimaginable in advance of the phonograph. This conjecture about our conceptual powers and, in turn, the emergence of modern comics warrants closer scrutiny than a review permits. Here, however, it is worth noting that the case for the historical hypothesis looks rather different if we demure from the sound image view.

In arguing for the dependence of the speech balloon upon phonographic technology, Exner suggests that, if speech balloons had developed prior to the phonograph, we ought to have observed the appearance of non-linguistic sounds as a kind of intermediary form. (58) Presumably this is because such sounds are, in some intuitive sense, less complicated and therefore likely easier to depict. Notice, however, that if speech balloons present, not “raw” sound images, but instead *interpreted* sonic information (e.g., sounds *qua* speech acts), we would actually expect the reverse.

In the case of ordinary speech balloons, we exploit standing correspondences between text and spoken language. When it comes to presenting non-linguistic sounds, we are no less required to exploit linguistic conventions—in this case, distinctive ones that introduce lexical items to pick out non-linguistic sounds. Contrary to the intuition that comics present unmediated sound images of what happens when a car speeds by or a dog vocalizes, when we deploy ‘woosh’ or ‘woof’ in comics, we rely upon baroque, culture-specific linguistic conventions for interpreting and relaying sonic events. While an account of these conventions is a job of cognitive linguistics, there is no reason to believe it would antedate the more familiar linguistic conventions that are exploited in the ordinary speech balloon. Indeed, the capricious nature of how we represent animals sounds suggests it is an especially complex affair. Rather than generating the prediction that we should see “zip” and “plop” as precursors to the speech balloon, once we recognize transdiegetic text in comics typically presents interpreted sonic information, we should suspect that “ordinary” speech balloons would be first on the scene.

Importantly, Exner’s critical intervention in the history of manga remains intact even if we reject the more tendentious theses regarding the nature of speech balloons. It is, however, a testament to the richness of this book that, alongside re-shaping how we ought to view the history of manga, it challenges some basic assumptions about the nature of the comics medium.