

Japanese Comics as Literary Art Form

Osamu Tezuka's *Phoenix* Series: Teaching Manga in the Literature Classroom

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One issue that faces many professors at small liberal arts colleges is teaching in areas “at the edges of our competencies,” as the popular phrase goes. When faced with the task of organizing my first Japanese literature course a few years ago, I first turned to the works of Natsume Soseki, Murakami Haruki, Junichiro Tanizaki, and other canonical authors with whom I could claim some broad familiarity (though not expertise). To this roster I sprinkled some variety and diversity in terms of genre, class, and gender, working for the most part with literary anthologies published by University presses. As I came to understand, however, there was an important element missing from this mixture—and it was the one thing that many students were studying Japanese for to begin with: Japanese comics, or *manga*.

Our Students and Japanese Comics

Manga, for those few readers who may not know, are Japan's great cultural export of this century. They are far and away the most popular comics in the United States, accounting for nearly 200 million dollars of sales per year.¹ If you walk into Barnes and Nobles or Borders, you will see racks and racks of manga, which such titles as *Naruto* and *Bleach*; you will invariably also see teenagers sitting on the floor reading them. Some of those teenagers are my students.

A ready-made audience of student readers was something of a double-edged sword. First, like any true fans, manga aficionados know their stuff. Were I to have incorporated popular contemporary manga in my class, there would invariably have been one group of students who knew it intimately, and another group who had never heard of it, and that was a combination I wished to avoid if possible. Furthermore, until relatively recently I didn't know *my* stuff at all. All I knew about

manga was based on my own first-hand observations in Japan in the 1990s: that they were broadly popular in Japan, appealing not just to children but to all demographics; that manga stories were published serially, in huge phone-book size anthologies that appeared weekly or monthly; and that manga had a reputation for what in the United States would be considered unacceptable levels of sex and violence. With regard to authors, artists, history, and most important of all literary and artistic quality, I was lost. Even if I *could* teach a course that included manga, I wondered, was it worth it from a pedagogical standpoint?

Finding Tezuka

Faced with this dilemma, I did what historians do, and that is look for an answer in the past. Since my manga readers had

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the present scene covered, I sought a manga author from their “ancient history”—the 1980s or even earlier.

A pair of books by the longtime manga scholar Frederik L. Schodt quickly led me to Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989), a figure known in Japan as the “God of Comics” and occasionally in the US as the “Walt Disney of Japan.”² While enormously influential as the pioneer of the “story comic”—novel-form stories running hundreds or sometimes thousands of pages—Tezuka's true significance rests with the fact that he was among the first people in any country to use the comics medium as a vehicle to grapple with the larger questions of man's significance in the universe. Schodt, a friend of Tezuka, put his feelings this way:

Tezuka infused nearly all his stories with what came to be known as “Tezuka humanism.” Tezuka respected all people and the sanctity of life. He had an ability to look beyond the superficial actions of people and to view them in their totality, to assess them in the context of their environment, history, and even (occasionally) of their karma. As a result, Tezuka's heroes were not two-dimensional but complex and flawed; sometimes they did the wrong, not right thing; sometimes they died.³

Schodt's praise had put me on the path, but without English translations of Tezuka's works, I would not have been able to proceed. Coincidentally enough, just as I was discovering Tezuka, a number of his works were being published in English translation by Viz Media. Among them was a series called *Phoenix*, which on examination revealed the narrative complexity and humanistic spirit Schodt described.⁴

Phoenix, or *Hi no Tori* in Japanese, was truly Tezuka's lifework and magnum

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opus; a sprawling, three thousand page meditation on human greed and finitude, he started writing it as a young man in the mid 1950s, and had not finished at the time of his death in 1989. In *Phoenix*, Tezuka began to perfect his vision of comics as a profound medium of expression, one that would allow him to explore the meaning and significance of human life.

Strictly speaking *Phoenix* is not a single work, but rather twelve separate tales; each stands alone but is linked to the others by the presence of the Phoenix, or the bird of immortality. The twelve stories in the *Phoenix* series veer back and forth in time; the first takes place in the 3rd century AD, while the second takes place three thousand years later. All utilize the quest for the Phoenix—and thus the quest for immortality—as a symbolic way to explore the meaning of man’s own finite existence.

In reviewing the volumes then available in English translation, I concluded that Tezuka’s works should be able to generate classroom discussions similar to those we might have about prose works such as *Kokoro* or “The Dancing Girl of Izu.” However, there remained the difference in narrative structure between prose literature and manga with which to contend, and rather than gloss over this issue I opted to confront it directly—which meant finding some way to discuss comics and comic narrative in a scholarly way.

Theorizing Comics as Art Form

Here I was fortunate to come across a book by comic artist Scott McCloud, entitled *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.⁵ *Understanding Comics* is a comic book, but one which attempts to deconstruct the language and grammar of graphic storytelling in a very sophisticated way. As McCloud explains it, the key to comics storytelling—or the “grammar” of comics, as he terms it—lies in the transition from panel to panel, specifically how much time or action elapses between each panel.

The most common type of transition in the Western comic is the **action-to-action transition**, in which each panel moves us forward one brief and discreet action at a time. We do not see every single moment that occurs, because we do not need do—our brains easily fill in the gaps of missing information.

The second most common type is **subject-to-subject transition**, in which

sufficient time or space passes in between panels to deliver the reader from one discrete scene and into the next. In order to ease this potentially jarring transition of both time and space, there is often a caption accompanying such transitions, which might say something like “Meanwhile, back at the Daily Planet.”

McCloud argues that the key to understanding manga—and of Tezuka’s monumental impact on the genre—lies in two other panel transitions, which until very recently were rarely seen in the West. The first are **moment to moment transitions**, in which the passage of time from panel to panel is extremely short; for example, we might see a character slowly turn his head over the course of several panels.

The other transition—and the one that really sets manga apart from Western comics—is what McCloud refers to as **aspect-to-aspect**. In aspect-to-aspect transition, time does not pass at all, but rather the eye or “camera” lingers on different aspects of a single scene. As McCloud says, “Rather than acting as a bridge between separate moments, the reader [looking at aspect to aspect transitions] must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments.”⁶

Both moment-to-moment and aspect-to-aspect transitions are credited to Tezuka’s own invention, and reflect his own exposure to Hollywood and Japanese cinema. Besides his penchant for drawing “cartoony” figures with oversized eyes (a reflection of his love for Disney characters), Tezuka’s drawing style also incorporated a distinct break from the past in his usage of cinematic elements—using a variety of angles and cuts to tell stories in a way that reflected his knowledge of Western animation and film. As he wrote in his autobiography,

I felt after the war that existing comics were limiting . . . as if seated in an audience viewing a stage, where the actors emerge from the wings and interact. This made it impossible to create dramatic or psychological effects, so I began to use cinematic techniques. . . . I experimented with close-ups and different angles, and instead of using only one frame for an action scene, I made a point of depicting a movement or facial expression with many frames, even many pages. . . . The result was a super-long comic that ran to 500, 600, or even 1000 pages.⁷

Applying Theory to *Phoenix*

While space does not permit an extended application of McCloud’s ideas to the *Phoenix* series, a few examples should communicate a sense of how Tezuka’s style can be discussed in the classroom. The first is from an early volume entitled *Future*, originally published in 1967-1968 [Figure 1]. Here we learn that two city-states, each ruled by a powerful computer, have committed to a course of mutual destruction; the panels presented on this page all occur during the final minute of their existences.

The three panels that comprise roughly the middle section represent a typical example of **aspect to aspect** transition, in that each image moves through space but not time; we move (right to left) from the ticking clock, the wind blowing



Figure 1. From *Phoenix: Future*



Figure 2. From *Phoenix: Resurrection*

through the grass, and then to the character of Dr. Saruta, who gazes on from within a glass dome. These panels—comparable to the impressionistic “pillow shots” of celebrated director Yasujiro Ozu—do not move the narrative forward in any way, but set a contemplative, forbidding mood, and serve to remind the viewer of nature and creation in the face of ultimate destruction.

Another *Phoenix* story set in the distant future is *Resurrection*, and this is the volume I ultimately adopted in my literature course last year. Originally published in serial format from 1970 to 1972, *Resurrection* is the tale of a young man who tries but ultimately fails to acquire the blood of the Phoenix. In this scene [Figure 2] the protagonist is regaining consciousness after having been shot and having lost his arm; first we see a house, followed by a long **moment-to-moment** passage (again, reading left to right) where he struggles to raise himself up with his remaining limb.

The middle three panels—which convey no physical movement, but rather a “camera” movement towards the main character—are reminiscent of an axial cut in cinema, a technique often employed by

another celebrated Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa. Such panel transitions dramatize the character’s supreme effort, and communicate a strong—if jarring—impact.

Finally, let us turn to a page from a volume entitled *Karma*. The story is set in the eighth century and stars a character who begins his life as a thief and beggar, but eventually becomes a revered Buddhist monk. On this page [Figure 3] we see another character, a master woodcarver who was attacked by the thief and loses the use of his right arm. In a series of panels, using moment-to-moment and aspect-to-aspect transitions, we experience the woodcarver’s struggles in an emotional and personal way.

The three pages represent the tiniest fraction of Tezuka’s output, but they convey what made his work so special. He was above all an innovative storyteller with a very vivid imagination, and a man who dedicated his talents to exploring the dimensions of the human experience. My students had no problem recognizing these qualities in his work, and in the end I found that their previous exposure to manga was not much of a factor in influencing their

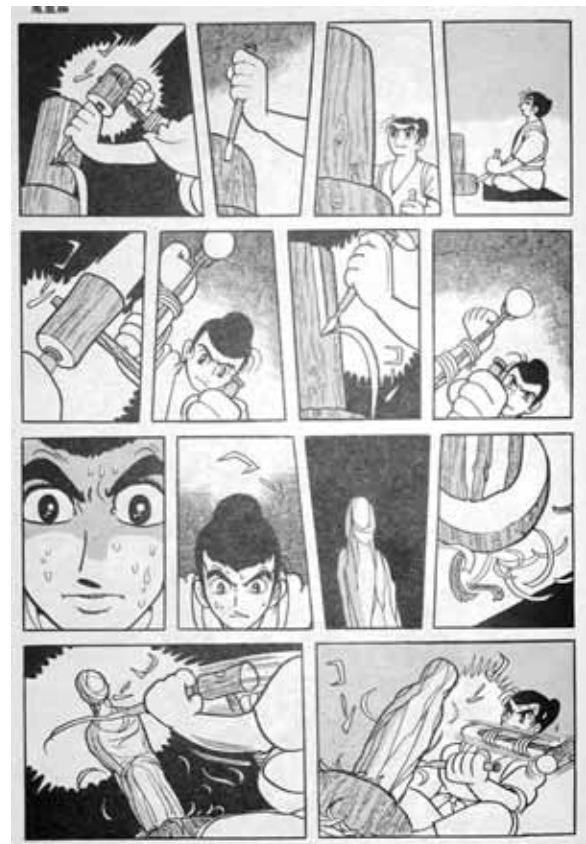


Figure 3. From *Phoenix: Karma*

responses to his artistry. The aficionados had little comparative advantage: we were working with complex texts at a level of theoretical complexity that caught them off guard, which in some cases helped shape anew the way they perceived their own interest in the genre. For the non-manga students, I’d like to think that the inclusion of the Tezuka material (paired with McCloud’s analytical framework) brought to the students not just an appreciation for manga, but also a deeper understanding of graphic storytelling as a truly literary medium. For their instructor, this was certainly the case.

Footnotes

¹Milton Griepp, “ICv2 White Paper—Graphic Novels: Growth and Change,” presented at the New York Comic Con, February 22, 2007.

²*Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Kodansha International Ltd., 1983); *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Stone Bridge Press, 1996).

³Schodt, *Dreamland Japan*, pp. 236-237.

⁴See Viz’s website at http://www.viz.com/products/products.php?series_id=132.

⁵Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Kitchen Sink Press, 1993).

⁶McCloud, p. 79.

⁷Schodt, *Manga! Manga!*, p. 63.