

Cultural Issues in the Perception of Narratives in Visual Design

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Abstract: With globalization, attention to how different cultures perceive texts visually and ideologically has become increasingly important to design. As internationally read texts, manga provide insights into such perception. This paper articulates how Japanese and American audiences perceive narrative sequences and ideological content. The study is based both on textual analysis and on surveys that explore both sequencing issues experienced by these audiences, and judgments made by readers responding to complex contexts created by Hayao Miyazaki in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. This study uses online surveys to explore how audiences negotiate manga narratives. Data will also be collected on the perception of Japanese cultural mythologies as well as themes such as good versus evil, the importance of family and community, habits of individual ethical behavior, and the importance of environmentalism. Special attention is given to perceptions involving both Miyazaki's use of young women as action heroes and his creation of morally ambiguous villains.

Key words: Narrative, ideology, manga, cultural differences, mythologies

1. Introduction

This paper is based on the recognition that audiences from different cultures possess different culturally acquired expectations for textual formats and conventions when reading. In exploring how culturally different audiences read manga, this paper articulates specific differences in how Asian and American audiences perceive narrative sequences and ideological content in graphic novels. The Asian audiences in this study include Japanese, Chinese, and Korean participants. The study features, in part, surveys that explore not only sequencing issues experienced by these audiences, but also judgments made by them as they respond to complex contexts as found in Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*.

2. Background

2.1 Ideological Content in Graphic Novels

Although Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a non-fiction graphic novel ten years in the making, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for its representation of Nazi Germany, graphic novels as a genre are often associated with comic books that, at most, might characteristically be expected to provide light entertainment for their readers. Stereotypically, comic books are associated with simple, even innocent, representations of the world and are not generally associated with sophisticated ideology.

Graphic novels, more lengthy than individual comic books, are known, however, for complex storylines. And Japanese comic books, or manga, feature a broad range of subjects—from action-adventure to business, from romance to sexuality—and have become popular world-wide. Furthermore, when successful, manga are frequently animated for international distribution. What is interesting here is that certain manga not only have complex storylines but also complex ideological systems underpinning the visual representation of the plots and characters of the narratives.

At times, these complex systems draw upon cultural mythologies as well as folk and fairy tales. Hayao Miyazaki in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* draws both from Japanese tales, such as the Japanese story about the Princess who loved insects (*Mushi mezuru himegimi*) as well as Greek mythology, specifically the *Odyssey* with the Greek princess of the same name (Nausicaa) as portrayed in Bernard Evslin's Japanese translation. Thus, Miyazaki's graphic novel draws from a diverse ideological spectrum that ranges from militaristic nihilism to environmentalism to classic ideals concerning hospitality.

2.2 Comparative Presentation of Storylines in Japanese and American Graphic Novels

An assumption of this study is that cultures influence reading conventions and interpretations. This assumption, in turn, involves the underlying assumption that specific cultures are relatively homogeneous. Certainly, an assumption of homogeneity seems to underpin other cultural work of the type this paper is engaged in. For example, Richard Nisbett's *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why* outlines Western thinking about the nature of human thought from Hume to Locke to Mill to modern cognitive scientists in comparison to Eastern thinking about human thought with its roots in Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Although Nisbett is painting with a broad brush, his observations are nevertheless informative.

While this study surveys Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and American audiences, it does not assume that everyone within each of the above-named cultures is identical. The study simply assumes that there *will be* cultural differences that can be identified. There are also potential problems in what texts are understood as comparable from culture to culture. For example, Japanese audiences might not perceive graphic novels first published as magazine "installments" (*Otaku*) as comparable to graphic novels that are published all-of-one-piece.

However, there is existing textual evidence that supports the idea that there are cultural differences in the visual and textual presentation of similar, if not identical, storylines in Eastern and Western graphic art. Such evidence can be found, for example, in the presentation of the *Star Wars* saga in Japanese and American graphic novels.

The Japanese versions characteristically dramatize the dynamics of action sequences almost exclusively through visual narration. In these sequences, as well as others, the characters' emotional reactions to events are typically captured in the visual presentation of the characters' eyes. In American versions, on the other hand, action is reflected not only in the graphics, but also in textual conventions for representing action, such as words like "Slam," "Bam," "Varoom," and "Ung." Characters' thoughts are conveyed primarily through textual reportage in word bubbles with occasional use of iconic images, like spirals to represent some type of confusion

or frustration or stars to represent pain. Character traits are represented using various standards of reference, such as evil being associated with curved posture.

3 Methodology

3.1 Textual analysis

The research entails both a close textual analysis of Miyazaki's work as well as mention of the work of other graphic artists. In addition, the paper reflects research into pattern language as well as visual language and literacy. As such, the paper recognizes in the graphic narratives a "pattern language," distilled from the actions of characters in the narrative. Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein discuss such pattern language in terms of issues in architectural building and planning efforts (*A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (1977)). "Each pattern," they assert, "describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over" (x).

The paper argues that the occurrences presented in Miyakai's visual language represent problems that recur in the narrative (and the world), and the actions of the characters represent both positive and negative solutions to these problems. The overall effect of this pattern language is to generate an ideological commentary on the various responses to the problems enacted by the characters found in the narrative.

In analyzing *Nausicaa*, **step one** was to identify the recurring problems in the action/events of the narrative. For example, several recurring problems emerged including the environmental problem of dealing with hostile landscapes, the ethical problem of defining good and bad behavior, and the developmental problem of Nausicaa learning to be an effective leader of her people. **Step two** was to identify the emotional issues that recur as challenges for the main characters and how these emotions play themselves out in the narrative. For example, Nausicaa struggles with impulsive reactions to events, especially in the early volumes of the series, when she openly confronts the enemy head-on with sword and absolute judgments. Her pattern of reactions modifies as the tale proceeds. **Step three** is to analyze how the recurring problems, both external and internal, are graphically represented. For example, as might be expected in manga, emotions are characteristically revealed in close-ups focused on the eyes. In *Nausicaa*, the internal is also represented as both visions and dreams, with various transitional close-up frames marking the transition between external and internal events.

In the examination of the graphics in such frames, the textual analysis features attention to major design principles, including repetition, rhythm, proportion, focus, direction and symmetry as they influence the presentation of the storyline and characters and as they contribute to the social organization of visual experience (see Michael S. Ball and Gregory W.H. Smith, *Analyzing Visual Data*). Some of the patterns in *Nausicaa* entail the function of various types of perspective, with long shots generally being used to contextualize the subject; medium shots to establish relations among characters and, at times, dramatize differing ideological positions; close-up shots, which tightly frame a person or object, essentially to announce the focus of the narrative at any given point, and extreme close-ups to alert the reader to the fact that "thought" is the primary action featured in the text at that moment.

Other patterns include the fact that characters often serve as avatars for ideological positions or beliefs. Insight into Japanese culture was obtained from such diverse sources as Mark W. MacWilliams critical anthology, *Japanese Visual Culture*, Hayaok Kawai's *The Japanese Psyche: Major Motifs in the Fairy Tales of Japan*, and Mina Cheon's "Japanimanga and techno-orientalism: Racism against Koreans in Japanese Manga." Research also includes insights gained from personal interviews with various culturally Asian faculty and students at a large Midwestern university.

3.2: Electronic Surveys

The paper will include the results of a small pilot study consisting, in part, of electronic surveys sent to Asian and American readers. For the pilot study, 20 surveys will be distributed, divided equally between Asian and American participants. Potential participants will represent a sampling of culturally Asian and American graduate faculty and students at a nationally recognized M.F.A. program in graphic design. The surveys, themselves, will be available for completion on a specified website. At the end of the survey, participants will be invited to participate in a follow-up discussion concerning the negotiation of manga narratives as well as of the perception of cultural themes and ideological components in the narratives.

The survey itself will elicit three types of information. The first entails demographic information, including age, gender, nationality, and educational level of the participant. The second type of information involves an evaluation of perceived personal expertise. It is understood that, as with all such information, the standpoint of the individual will affect the rating. For example, if the individual compares himself/herself to known "experts" in manga in Japan (*Otaku*), then he or she might rate themselves as "average" in his/her knowledge of manga, whereas his/her skill or familiarity level might, in fact, be "good" or "very good" compared with that of the rest of the participants. This is an identified limitation of the data gathered. The ratings scale used in this section involves Likert scale evaluations: very good, good, average, poor, very poor.

A third type of information gathered by the survey entails participants reading manga excerpts and coming to conclusions about sequences, characters, and themes. A limitation of this survey section is that the entire graphic novel cannot be presented. However, selected excerpts have been chosen based on their representative nature. The featured excerpts are examined by participants in terms of the reader's perception of Nausicaa's character, her motivation, and her relationships with other characters. Excerpts also are evaluated in terms of themes, possible precedents in Japanese mythology, similarities to Western folk tales/myths, as well as parallels between Nausicaa's character traits and those of heroes in American graphic novels. Finally, excerpts are evaluated in terms of various established narrative types, including the coming of age story, the chaos narrative, the quest narrative, a springboard story, and an anti-story.

4. Conclusions

This paper will be relevant to those interested in the design of narrative sequences as well as the influence of culture on visual perception and on ethical judgments. This analysis reveals that *Nausicaa* shows fluidity in its ethical standards and that the narrative is occupied in tracing the growth of a young female's understanding of how to provide successful leadership for her community in a hostile world. The graphic representation of Nausicaa's world includes culturally based allusions to past heroic sagas, but is unique in its complex vision.

5. References and Citations

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