Conference Report:

VI Foro Internacional de Creación en la Frontera: "Manga in a postdigital environment"

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On May 30th and 31st of 2022 the dx5 - the digital & graphic art research group from the University of Vigo organized the *VI Foro Internacional de Creación en la Frontera*, an academic symposium entitled "Manga in a Postdigital Environment". Held in Pontevedra (Spain), this symposium was part of a research project funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (ref. PID2019-108898GA-I00), and meant to be a truly transdisciplinary event, involving a dozen manga experts from all over the world from a wide variety of scholarly backgrounds, brought together to engage in open discussions about this media form. Chaired by José Andrés Santiago (University of Vigo), this symposium took place in the historic building of "Casa das Campás" —headquarters of the Vice-Rectorate of the Pontevedra Campus and located at the heart of the town— following a hybrid format, with both onsite and online presentations. This increasingly popular format was not only the result of the exceptional health circumstances, but an informed choice to encourage attendees from Spain and abroad. We chose a simple structure organized in three sessions over two days with multiple, 25-minute presentations followed by long, open discussions. The aim of this event was not a collection of isolated presentations, but rather a push towards truly engaging discussions, the raising of new questions, a seeking of advances in Manga Studies in a broad sense, and the expansion of future possibilities for research and mutual collaboration. In 2019, we already held a twin symposium, "Anime: A Transdisciplinary Perspective", which provided an ideal framework to work together towards a shared project, which finally took shape as a book entitled *Anime Studies: media-specific approaches to* Neon Genesis Evangelion (Stockholm University Press, 2021).
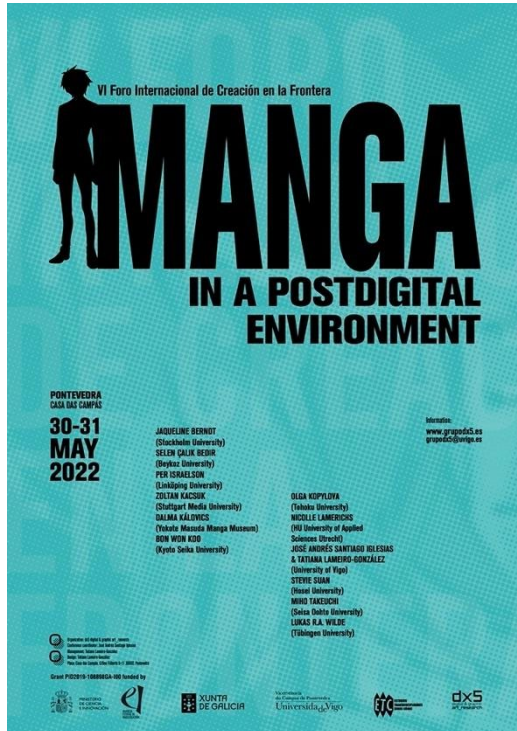
As suggested by the title, this 2022 symposium revolved around the notion of postdigital manga, with a major take from a media ecology focus. Media ecology explores how different artistic, social and cultural media change over time. In this symposium, we discussed contemporary manga, the gamification of the reading experience, the use of virtual reality (VR) for the recreation of different scenarios, and even the arrival of digitally generated images by means of machine learning technology. In this symposium, we understood "postdigital" after the technological and cultural changes brought about by the digital age—involving new production, cultural and aesthetic practices—, and therefore postdigital manga works are postdigital in the sense that "the digital" has already become a seamless natural part of our daily lives.

In the opening presentation, *From Cover to Page. From Title to the Speech Balloon: An Analysis of Typographic Applications in Naruto and Bleach,* José Andrés Santiago Iglesias and Tatiana Lameiro-González (University of Vigo) addressed how fonts and lettering are used in manga, an aspect that is often overlooked in formal analysis. Choosing *Naruto* and *Bleach* as case-studies, they compared the original Japanese *tankōbon* volumes with international editions, focusing on cover design in Tite Kubo's manga work, and the changing in-story speech fonts in Masashi Kishimoto's epic ninja tale. When analyzing *Bleach* covers design, the presenters highlighted the noticeable influences by the Swiss

International Style, and other European design schools, and how such a style has been adapted and often lost in the different design choices by international publishers. Moreover, when addressing *Naruto* the presenters also pointed out how the emotional state of the characters conveyed by fonts in the original manga is usually lost in international editions due to the choice of consistent typefaces for speech dialogues.

The following paper, entitled *Kyara and the "Other Sides of Narrative": A Map of Discourses*, was delivered by Lukas R.A. Wilde (Tübingen University), addressing the different ways to use *kyara* to conceptualize characters in manga. Taking the internationally acclaimed manga series *Demon Slayer* (*Kimetsu no Yaiba*) as a point of departure, Lukas R.A. Wilde revised multiple overlapping theories and highlighted how manga protagonists are not narrative-contained entities but are rather defined by media and participatory practices.

Next, in her insightful presentation *Manga Meets VR: Technological Challenges for the Mangaesque*, Selen Çalık Bedir (Beykoz University) explained how the growing digitalization process followed by comics has ultimately led to hybrid forms in which VR has taken an interesting role, especially with regards to gaze, the readers' perspective and other spatial aspects. Through some eye-catching videos of the actual playing process she illustrated how VR works handle the element of the spatial positioning, and explained how the first examples of VR comics didn't experiment with panel layout, but rather relied on the spectacular immersive experience of facing the reader with huge pages in close proximity. In her presentation, Selen Çalık Bedir compares *Tales of Wedding Rings* by Square Enix with other works, most notably including the VR adaptation of Richard McGuire's seminal graphic novel *Here*. Through this meticulous process, she highlights how VR

manga works prioritize the characters rather than the environment, despite the spatial possibilities provided by the VR headset.

The last presenter of the morning was Olga Kopylova (Tohoku University). In *Work-in-Progress: Textual Variance of Serialized Manga,* she addresses the different stages of completion that manga works undergo, since they are serialized in the *mangashi* magazine until the publication of the tankōbon (or even in subsequent releases and special editions), and how these modification might affect readers and reading practices. Providing an overwhelmingly abundant visual comparison of pages from *Golden Kamuy, Ajin* and *Requiem of the Rose King*, she stressed how many authors redraw, arrange or perfect their previous pages after being first serialized with the tankōbon volume in mind, subtle sometimes —almost indistinguishable except to the keen eye— while other times involve radical departures from the original drawing and page layout. Not only from a fan perspective but an academic one, Olga Kopylova raised interesting questions about the cohabitation of these printed different versions (as well as the digital editions), including a frame of reference to define the edition to be used in the formal analysis of a given work.

The four speakers in the afternoon session articulated an exceptionally fluid panel, in which the questions raised by each of them seemed to be designed to pave the way for the next presentation. In her presentation, *Manga as Participatory Media: The Hand Drawing Perspective. From the 1960s' Dojinshi to SNS Manga in Japan*, Miho Takeuchi (Seisa Dohto University) focused on amateur manga artists sharing their work through participatory platforms and social networks, who do not necessarily participate in many of the established manga conventions widely spread among professional and semi-professional artists. In fact, her presentation dealt with

formal aspects such as the physicality, the materiality and the line-work of the manga, as she paid special attention the role of the "hand-drawn" line, highlighting the distinctiveness of the drawing, tracing back to the *dōjinshi* artists from 1960's up to the amateur artists in the last decade. Miho Takeuchi's presentation was followed by Dalma Kálovics (Yokote Masuda Manga Museum) paper *Panel Layout in Story Manga between Medium-Specificity and Standardization*. Through a thorough and comprehensive analysis, illustrated with a impressive array of archival material, she explained how the page layout changed in the 1970's to fit the dominant standard and therefore ended the previous practice of rearranging pages from the original medium of publication to other formats, also paving the way for the consolidation of the *tankōbon* format. However, as Kálovics pointed out, despite the shift in the manga industry in the shape of digital works and distribution via digital platforms, the *mangashi* magazine remains as a standard reluctant to change.

In her presentation, *Revisiting Manga's "Progenitors" from a Postdigital Perspective: Visual Flow in Graphic Narratives*, Jaqueline Berndt addressed contemporary manga from both a historical and a material perspective. Analyzing a series of pages from picture stories through manga tools, she visually traced the similarities and substantial differences within contemporary graphic narratives, but also between manga panel layout of contemporary webtoons. Formally, Berndt urged the audience to consider how images work to guide the reader towards an empathic connection with those given images or the developed narrative contained within a given work.

As a closure for the day, presentations were followed by a masterclass by Bon Won Koo (Kyoto Seika University), entitled *The Differences between Manga and Webtoon based on the Change of Medium: The Making of the Webtoon Version of*

"Tanuki vs. Zodiac 12". Involved in the adaptation of the "Tanuki vs. Zodiac 12" manga into a webtoon, as part of the international exhibition held at the Rietberg museum, Bon Won Koo thoroughly explained the specificity of the webtoon reading experience in terms of rhythm and flow, and therefore how it is curated by the author to provide the reading a seamlessly yet engaging reading experience. In her presentation, she explained how she personally adapted, broke down and modified the original manga panel layout to fit the webtoon experience, considering the gaze of the reader and the scrolling speed on both axes.

The following morning, the third session began with *Art of Recursion: the Technical Transindividuation of (Postdigital) Comics* by Per Israelson (Linköping University). In his presentation, he provided a profound conceptual review of two comic book projects by artist Ilan Manouach: *The Cubicle Island* (2020) and *Fastwalkers* (2022). On one hand, *The Cubicle Island* is a collage of hundreds of appropriated cartoons of desert islands, with the original captions removed and replaced by those suggested by microworkers. On the other hand, *Fastwalkers* is a manga scripted and drawn by an artificial neural network. As Israelson explained, "the postdigital aesthetic put into play by Manouach's work can be framed as an articulation of a neocybernetic and posthumanist conceptuality".

Next, Stevie Suan (Hosei University) took the stage with *Masking Anime's Transnationality: On Media-Form and Cultural Production in this Era of Globalization*. In a comprehensive and thorough presentation, he discussed how addressing anime as a media-form —with three modes of globality operating as a whole— provides a broader perspective of the transnational network behind most contemporary anime productions. Nicolle Lamerichs (HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht) followed with a presentation entitled *The New Media Mix:*

Materiality, Affect and Participatory Cultures in Manga, addressing the future of manga, manga fandom, and a myriad of new ways of fan-consumption, from webtoons to NFTs, due to their potential to engage new audiences. Ultimately, Lamerichs highlighted the transcultural potential behind these new platforms based on collaboration and participatory practices. Finally, the last presenter was Zoltan Kacsuk (Stuttgart Media University). In his presentation, *Utilizing Metadata Analytics for Research on Manga, Anime and Video Games: Introducing the Japanese Visual Media Graph,* Kacsuk provided a thought-provoking introduction of the JVMG project in which he is currently involved, and explained how metadata analytics can be used to address some topics (sometimes) extensively discussed by manga researchers from a shocking new perspective. At the end, he showed with pinpoint accuracy the potential—and the limitations—of online databases developed by fan communities.

As organizer of this event, I can only thank the speakers for their outstanding performance and everyone among the attendees for their vibrant engagement and willingness to participate in an enriching scholarly exchange. A truly transdisciplinary symposium which nevertheless left me hungry for more. Looking forward to 2024!