Harriet - Comp 1- extended writing

Blood in the Gutters

An investigation into east and west approaches to sequential art.

By the general public – or at least those who are not in the know – comics are often viewed as both a modern media and generally aimed at younger audiences. A deeper look into the history of comics and the vast library of comics themselves evidences that this is simply not true. By definition according to Scott McCloud's 'Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art'[1], comics are juxtaposed (adjacent or side-by-side) static images in deliberate sequence. However, under this general definition, comics are vastly diverse, according to such factors as what part of the world they are from. In particular there is a remarkable split in comic styles from the "eastern" side of the world – such as China, Korea and Japan – and the "western" world. This assignment will be exploring and analysing the differences between these two distinct types of comics.

Contrary to common belief, the term "comics" refers to the medium itself; the definition is strictly neutral to matters of style, quality or subject matter. Although most books about comics began shortly before the turn of the 20th century, sequential art has been around for hundreds or even thousands of years; for example, a pre-Columbian picture manuscript was discovered by Cortés around 1519. This 36-foot long, brightly coloured, painted screenfold tells of the great military and political hero 8-Deer "Tiger's Claw". Another example is the Bayeux Tapestry: a 230-foot long tapestry detailing the Norman conquest of England, beginning in 1066. Even ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs fall under the definition of sequential art, or "comics". Despite the length of time it has existed, only with the invention of printing in the 15th Century did this medium become available to all.
By the 18th Century, artists such as William Hogarth were creating sequential art, such as Hogarth's six-plate picture story 'A Harlot's Progress', published in 1731, and by the mid-19th Century, artists, in particular Rudolphe Töpffer, were both combining words and pictures, and also beginning to utilise cartooning techniques such as panel borders. In this respect, Töpffer could be view as a father of sorts to the modern comic. At around about the same eras – the 18th and 19th Centuries – artists in Japan were also achieving similar feats; writer and artist Santō Kyōden had his picture-book 'Shiji no yukikai' published in 1798, and in the early 19th century Aikawa Minwa published his 'Manga hyakujo' in 1814. These examples of sequential art are contemporarily known as manga, "manga" being the term for sequential

art originating from Japan.

As mentioned in 'Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics'[2] by Paul Gravett, manga takes the fundamentals of American comics, the relationships between picture, frame and word, and, by fusing them with their own traditional love for entertaining popular art, sculpted them through their own culture's attitudes and approaches into a storytelling medium with its own distinctive form. Comics have evolved so differently in the east than the west primarily due to not only the significantly different climate and culture, but also because it was in Japan where comics developed in relative isolation, spawning a host of unique approaches to making comics.

One of the many format differences between western comics and manga is the panel-to-panel transition commonly used in manga known as "aspect-to-aspect". As defined in Scott McCloud's 'Understanding Comics'[1], aspect-to-aspect transitions bypasses time for the most part and sets a "wandering eye" on different aspects of a place, idea or mood; they have been an integral part of Japanese mainstream comics almost from the very beginning. They are most commonly used to establish a mood or sense of place, using scattered fragments to encompass a single moment rather than a directly chronological series of events; sequence, while still significant, seems less relevant to aspect-to-aspect than it is to other panel transitions. Although a transition found primarily in manga, many western comics have learned from this and have been incorporating it into their own format.

Another technique used most often in Japanese manga that has influenced Western comics – in fact only recently having adopted the technique –is known as "panel bleeding". This is one that causes a similar effect to the aspect-to-aspect transitions; panel bleeding is where a panel is not closed in by a border of lines as is traditional, but one or more of its edges runs off the edge of the page. Such a familiar icon as the closed panel is no longer present to contain time. Time becomes boundless and the scene or atmosphere of a scene can be effectively established.

A further difference between eastern and western comics is that western comics, as they do not tend to linger on a moment in order to give a mood or sense of place, instead have a sense of immediacy and a much faster pace than manga. Western art and literature is generally much more goal-oriented; the east, alternatively, are significantly more intricate, conscientious and focus more on detail.

Comprehensible visual indicators of emotions of the characters in comics are essential to achieve what the piece is trying to accomplish. As comics have progressed, just as the

cartoon face is an abstract, visual indicators of emotion have also simplified over time to the point of becoming more symbolic than they are drawn replications of real life. In effect, these symbols representing emotion have become part of a visual vocabulary of comics. For example, the use of the teardrop-shaped symbol known as the sweat-bead, particularly when combined with facial expressions and other factors, can indicate a variety of emotions, from fear and panic to embarrassment or exhaustion. Lines around a characters head can indicate realisation or surprise, and replacing the eyes of a character with crosses is well-known to be a representation of death, fatigue or defeat. Comics from all over the globe regularly use such visual techniques, but Japan is particularly well-known for its abstract, distinctive, and sometimes downright peculiar symbols of emotion in manga. Much of their visual vocabulary may seem obscure to Westerners new to manga due to the fact that many of these visual representations have been constructed around cultural customs and ideas that belong predominantly to Japan. For example, what is now known as a "snot-bubble" that inflates out of a characters nose to represent that a character is deeply asleep actually originates from the Japanese concept that one's soul can escape from one's nose while they are asleep – so, at least originally in Japan, the bubble was not recognised as one consisting of snot, but of the character-in-question's soul. Equally as obscure is the manga representation of lust, which is visually portrayed in cartoons through a nose-bleed, at least when in a comical situation. Another more renowned symbol of emotion originally used in Japanese comics is the over-simplified "throbbing vein" on a forehead used to represent anger. This is one that has been more commonly known to be incorporated in western comics in recent times.

However, despite the many differences between western and eastern comics, whether they be format, technique, content, or even process, they continue to significantly influence each other and coexist with little tribulation. As revered "God of manga", Japanese mangaka and animator Osamu Tezuka (1928 – 1989), believed: "comics are an international language that cross boundaries and generations. Comics are the bridge between all cultures."

This can be evidenced through comparison between a strictly western comic and a purely Japanese manga. Western comic 'Hildafolk', by English illustrator and cartoonist Luke Pearson, and manga 'Fruits Basket' by Japanese mangaka Natsuki Takaya, are vastly different pieces, and it is evident that part of the reason for this is their context and culture. Although Pearson himself stated that one of his inspirations is the Japanese anime film company Studio Ghibli, the vast majority of his influences are western-based, from Phillip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' to Finnish author and illustrator Tove Jansson and particularly tales of Scandinavian folklore.

On the surface, the most noticeable difference between Pearson's 'Hildafolk' and Takaya's 'Fruits Basket' is the art style. The characters of 'Hildafolk' are all visually pleasing and simplistic in their design; the scenery and backgrounds around them, too, are consistent with the style of the characters, also keeping to a more charmingly simple style. The characters of 'Fruits Basket', on the other hand, are more detailed and realistic in their design whilst still keeping to an appealingly abstract style; this contrasts with the intricate, complex, nearly photo-realistic backgrounds and scenery. Also typical to manga, the detail in the way characters are drawn changes suddenly into simplistic and representational for comedic purposes. 'Hildafolk', in contrast, stays consistent to the amount of detail in which the characters are drawn.

The series of graphic novels by Canadian cartoonist Bryan Lee O'Malley called 'Scott Pilgrim' is remarkable in that it purposefully takes inspiration both from Eastern – particularly Japanese – comics, and western comics, too. His character design in particular shows simplistic and "cartoony" qualities as Hildafolk does, as well as the typical enlarged eyes and detail in body and clothing that manga such as 'Fruits Basket' demonstrates. The backgrounds and scenery, whilst simple, are more detailed and realistic than those of 'Hildafolk', yet do not even compete with the photorealism of the scenery in 'Fruits Basket'. Overall, O'Malley's line style appears to be more western-oriented than eastern. It is attractively messy, using India ink and brush for the line-work, with shadows often represented with solid blocks of black and evidencing little to no use of computerised screentone or halftone as is used in mainstream manga. This greatly contrasts with 'Fruits Basket', which has very thin and clean lines and high use of computerised screentones and halftones. The pieces do share in common, however, computerised text, although in the case of 'Fruits Basket' this may be due to the fact that it is a translation; the original Japanese version may have had hand-written text.

The process and style of lines in 'Scott Pilgrim' corresponds with those of the western comic 'Hildafolk'. 'Hildafolk' is very much hand-processed: including how Pearson applies handwritten text, and how even the panels are "wobbly" in their line quality; the exception to this hand-drawn quality 'Hildafolk' exhibits is the colouring, which is done digitally. However, the fact that there is any colouring at all seems to reflect its western origins, as mainstream eastern comics tend to be monochromatic. Unlike the other two pieces, the colour scheme in 'Hildafolk' is used very effectively, changing not only with the environment, but with the tone – when protagonist Hilda is cosily snuggled up in her tent, the colour scheme inside the tent has warm colours such as reds, pinks and burgundies, which contrasts with the surrounding panels of the dark and rainy outside, purely coloured with dull blues and greys. When Hilda finds herself within the reach of potential danger in the form of a troll after having fallen asleep, this is represented through the reddening sky

and its stark contrast to the completely white, thickly falling snow and Hilda herself; the apparent franticness of the falling snow may also represent the panic she is feeling.
The use of colour within 'Hildafolk', among other aspects of the book, has influenced my own work. My comic titled "Ignorance is Jeff: Ask a Silly Question, Get a Silly Jeff" (designed to appear to be the first issue in a series), like 'Hildafolk', was drawn and inked by hand, then coloured digitally. I attempted to show a certain amount of atmosphere through the colours I chose; for example, when Jeff is shocked in one panel, the background turns abruptly yellow, which contrasts with the serene green tones of the surrounding panels when he is sleeping. Furthermore, during a scene in which a high-strung Jeff and Billy are fighting in a tense videogame battle, through the darkening of background colours and shifting back and forth between two juxtaposing colours – green and orange – I tried to give a feeling of tension. Although it was unintentional, this is a particularly remarkable similarity in colour to 'Hildafolk' that 'Ignorance is Jeff' – the use of pale green to symbolise calmness and serenity (such as when Hilda is exploring and drawing in the wilderness), and the use of orange to signify tension (such as the reddish-orange colour of the sky when Hilda wakes up to the impending danger of a troll).

Because neither 'Scott Pilgrim' nor 'Fruits Basket' have colour, they cannot create atmosphere in this way. What they can do, however, is use panel layout and panel-to-panel transitions to help do this instead. The panel-to-panel transitions used in 'Scott Pilgrim' are generally more similar to 'Hildafolk', being more western styled in the way that they are based primarily on action and directly what is going on rather than setting. The closest thing O'Malley uses to more manga-esque transitions, such as aspect-to-aspect, is his use of establishing shots with every change of scenery or a jump in time. However, generally his panel layouts and transitions remain western styled. The panels sometimes become particularly abstract and artistic, usually when obscure or otherworldly happens, implying a dream-like quality by dramatically altering the sizes and spacing of panels than when nothing noticeably abnormal is happening. For example, when protagonist Scott Pilgrim's object of affection Ramona skates through the subspace highway in Scott's head, the panel layout becomes more spread out, the space between the panels become black instead of its usual white, and even the illustrations themselves hold a different atmosphere than when nothing supernatural or weird is happening.

In comparison to both 'Scott Pilgrim' and 'Hildafolk', 'Fruits Basket' reads right-to-left in a particularly diagonal-vertical manner down the page, unlike many western comics, including the other two pieces, which tend to be more horizontal in their panel layout and speech bubble positioning. The panels themselves in 'Fruits Basket' are very irregular in their positioning and size and are scattered over pages, or often not used at all, unlike the typically structured panel layouts of western comics.

It is not just the visuals that separate eastern comics from western comics. When the actual writing of each of the three pieces is studied and compared, this becomes clear. For example, each of the three pieces display humour within their storylines, but in very different ways. The humour of 'Fruits Basket' comes more from slapstick, and even more so from characters' emotional reactions, whether reacting towards a serious and difficult situation, such as when protagonist Tohru is forced to live outside in a tent in the wilderness due to her mother's death, or to embarrassing ones, such as Tohru's flustered and mortified reactions when abruptly exposed to nudity after the animals around her transform back into humans. Humour in Scott Pilgrim, on the other hand, seems much more western – particularly American – influenced than eastern, relying much more from witty one-liners, such as when an unimpressed Kim (a friend of Scott Pilgrim's) says to Scott, "if your life had a face, I would punch it." The humour in 'Hildafolk' seems to differ from both 'Scott Pilgrim' and 'Fruits Basket', although, arguably, it marginally holds more of the same mentality to the former than the latter despite not relying on the same methods to portray such humour. 'Hildafolk' is far more subtle and obscure than both of the other pieces and relies on a combination of the general situation and the characters themselves – such as when an odd character known as "the wood man" randomly wanders into Hilda's house and, without giving any reason or explanation for his presence, lies himself in front of the fire and silently remains there – and, humorously so, Hilda is unaffected by this apart from mild irritation.

Furthermore, each of three of the stories share similarities in that they all share supernatural qualities, but the ilk and demonstration of these qualities are clearly affected by culture. The supernatural aspect of 'Fruits Basket' revolves around traditional Chinese and Asian traditions and myths; in an otherwise identical world to the one we live in now, thirteen members of a wealthy family known as the Sohmas are cursed to transform into one of the animals of the Chinese Zodiac if they become weak or are hugged by a member of the opposite sex. While sometimes sparking humorous situations, this supernatural aspect of the book is portrayed dramatically and is taken very seriously. Contrastingly, the supernatural aspects to 'Scott Pilgrim', such as the league of seven evil ex-boyfriends or the subspace highway running through Scott's head, are vastly sillier and very much revolve around humour. Luke Pearson, on the other hand, handles the supernatural elements to 'Hildafolk' from an entirely different perspective. Unlike how the supernatural aspects in 'Fruits Basket' are played up to be shocking and unusual, or the humorously vague and fleeting nature of such aspects in 'Scott Pilgrim', supernatural details and occurrences are displayed to be entirely normal, consistent and unsurprising to the universe of 'Hildafolk'. Whether it be fox-dogs with antlers, wood men, or rocks that turn into giant trolls when night falls, these features of 'Hildafolk' are taken naturally into the characters' strides as if

they are everyday occurrences. It is as if Hilda and the other characters are living directly in a tale of Scandinavian folklore.

All three of these pieces have influenced my own work in some way or another, both consciously and subconsciously, and the way supernatural occurrences and events are introduced and handled is one of them. An example of this is my 28-page comic book, 'Imp', which deals with a supernatural occurrence in a way which seems to combine aspects of the three studied pieces. A story with a single panel per page with a purposeful avoidance of dialogue, 'Imp' is about a boy who one day, whilst working on a computer in a library, discovers a mischievous imp, and the events which follow. In a similar way to the discovery of people turning into animals and vice versa in 'Fruits Basket', I attempted to show the appearance of the imp to be shocking and otherworldly through the boy's curious and surprised reaction upon its discovery. The actual creature itself shows glimpses of influences from 'Hildafolk', which contains all sorts of mythical creatures, and I attempted to insert humour into the comic through the imp in a similar way to the supernatural occurrences of 'Scott Pilgrim'.

In addition, the actual physical books themselves differ in appearance and standard. 'Scott Pilgrim' appears to imitate 'Fruits Basket' and other manga in its physical form; it is of a traditional A5 size, printed black-and-white on thin, cheap paper and has an overall manga-like "mass-produced" look to its production. A single copy of 'Hildafolk', on the other hand, with its unconventional shape and size (more square and larger than A5 but smaller than A4), its use of high quality paper and offset printing, and its complete absence of computerised printed text, looks as though it could very well be an original, hand-made book. While this in itself is not particularly eastern or western, it has the essence of a small-press book, and as the small-press is initially a British tradition, it enhances its English – or perhaps generally European – feel. On another comparative note, I tried to give my comic book 'Imp' a similar unique, hand-made feel by doing as much as I could by hand, including the drawings, inking, and even screen-printing each front cover of all the 18 copies of the book I produced.

In conclusion, from colour, tone, line-work and art-style, to the application of humour and certain story devices and even the way it is printed and produced, it is evident through these examples that western comics and eastern comics vary immensely. Whether made traditionally and keeping the ideas of east and west separate, as is the case with 'Hildafolk' and 'Fruits Basket', or combining the ideas and traditions of both extremes, such as 'Scott Pilgrim', it is arguably clear that all three methods of executing and producing a story can work immeasurably well in their own ways. These three comics alone evidence that this art form, no matter what part of the world they were produced in or what cultural or

otherwise influences they may have had, are not only based upon a vast history, but can be aimed at broader audiences.

Bibliography

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