Understanding Manga as a “Style” through Essay Manga’s Multimodal Literacies

— And Its Relations to the Discourse on “local art style” in Malaysian Comics

Suraya Binti Md NASIR (スラヤ・ビンテ・マード・ナシル : Senior lecturer of Multimedia Creative

Department, Faculty of Art, Computing & Creative Industry, Sultan Idris Education University)

✉ suraya.mn@fskik.upsi.edu.my

(マレーシア)スルタンイドリス教育大学アート、コンピューティング、クリエイティブ産業学部、マルチメディアクリエイティブ部講師。『Narrative and Identity : A Case Study on Malaysian Autobiographical Comics』(TRANSNATIONAL GRAPHIC APPRATIVES : INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR COMIC ART Vol. 20, No.1, Spring/Summer, 2018)、『Malaysianess of Mangesque Comics : on Identity and Graphic Narratives』PhD dissertation, (Kyoto Seika University, 2019)、『Malaysia Transcultural creativity in animation production and commercial dynamics』(JAPANESE ANIMATION IN ASIA TRANSNATIONAL INDUSTRY, AUDIENCES, AND SUCCESS London and New York : Routledge Publishing 2021)など。

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The trans-cultural consumption of Japanese Manga in Malaysia has prompted a significant amount of manga-influenced local works. As an outcome, traces of Japanese Manga can be found through its iconic art styles, storytelling and Japanese culture in these works. While fans show the positive response for these manga-influenced local works, the artists’ community shows the opposite response, in particular, related to the representation of the “typical Japanese manga-style”, resulting in the idea that these artists are turning away from the “local art style” which has been pioneered by the predecessors. The sentiment of Japanese Manga as a “single art style” contributed to this misconception on what constitutes a Japanese manga identity. In which the researcher proposes the introduction of ‘Essay Manga’ (コミックエッセイ or エッセイマンガ) as a way to divert the attention of Japanese Manga’s art style, by shifting to the other attributes of Japanese Manga which is the story. Essay Manga is a manga work that describes the events that happened around the manga artist but without any specifications towards manga visual conventions. To illustrate the importance of story versus art style in Essay Manga, the characteristics, forms, examples are sketched out through the works of Hosokawa Tenten and Azuma Hideo. A section on Malaysia “local art style” is also discussed and ties in with the discussion of Manga. Eventually, the study argues that Japanese Manga is not limited to visual representation; instead, it is accommodated by its engaging storytelling, thus justifying Essay Manga’s potential as a multimodal literacy works.

Keywords Essay Manga(エッセイマンガ), Art Style(アートスタイル), Local Identity(ローカルアイデンティティ), Multimodal(マルチモーダル), Malaysia(マレーシア)

1 Introduction

The initial idea that contributed to this research started from my personal journey as a professional comic artist in Malaysia. Throughout my experience working in the comics and cartoon industry since 2001, I have worked with multiple well-known comics magazine publishers in Malaysia, from which I have gained vast experience in how publishing company works in Malaysia. Working with various editors for each publication provided an interesting case study for examining the requirements created by local magazines and comic book publishers for the commercial marketing of their works. Interestingly, certain publishers intended for cultural identity to be highlighted compared to others. Adopting “local art style” in the comics is another suggestion made by the editors, without a clear explanation of what “local art style” entails.

My early introduction to comics books started with Japanese comics, *Manga*¹. Malay-translated Manga such as *Doraemon* (Fujiko F. Fujio), *Sailormoon* (Takeuchi Naoko), *3x3 Eyes* (サザンアイズ) by Takada Yuzo and *Ghost Sweeper Mikami* (GS美神 極楽大作戦!!) by Takashi Shiina are the four manga titles which I consumed in the period between 1995 to 1997. From there, I have been adapting the language of Japanese comics in my works. As someone who has been adopting manga conventions in my works, this poses a question on what is a “local art style”? Although it has different varieties, why is Japanese Manga being classified into a singular art style in Malaysia? It was not until I discovered a different type of Japanese Manga called Essay Manga, where I saw a different perspective in seeing Japanese Manga as an art style.

This study examines the discussion of “manga as an art style” by looking at Essay Manga. Essay Manga is a manga work that describes the events around the manga artist, which features different types of art styles practised by both professional and amateur artists. In this study, I argue that defining Manga as a style is not limited to its visuals; instead, it comes with its textual narrative, as seen through Essay Manga. In Essay Manga, the textual narrative is predominant as compared to its visuals. To demonstrate this, two well-known Japanese Essay Manga titles are examined. The two titles are Hosokawa Tenten’s *My Partner Became Depressed* (ソレがうつになりまして) and Azuma Hideo’s *Disappearance Diary* (失踪日記). These titles were chosen due to their popularity in Japan, where both showcases works by professional and amateur artists. The background on the local art style and Manga appropriation in Malaysia

¹ The term Manga throughout this study describes comics that originate from Japan.

is also discussed in the first part of the essay, followed by a discourse on Manga as a style. By adapting multimodal outlook on investigating these manga in relation to manga tropes and conventions, I hope that this study can contribute to the discussion of art style and identity, as well as literacy discourse, particularly for my Malaysian readers. For international readers, to give an outlook of the trans-cultural process of Manga in Malaysia and the continuous quest of manga as a medium-discourse which consistently exists in Malaysia. I anticipate for readers to understand more about Essay Comics as discourse on this manga genre is mainly scarce.

2 Background :

Malaysian's Quest in defining "local style" in comics

To understand what and which refers to the locality of the "Malaysian local style", a brief introduction to the pre-manga Malaysian comics and cartoon works is necessary to understand how such ideas materialise. In general, "Malaysian local style" refers to works created by Malaysian artists that depict distinctive symbols and icons associated with Malaysia. These can be seen in characters, setting, storyline, and ethnic, cultural, and religious signifiers. Ideally, Malaysian comics are subjected to the government's printing regulations where these works do not offend or disadvantage any particular group of people in Malaysia; where artists are also indirectly tied to the Malaysian print media, legislated by the Printing Presses Act and Ownership (Lent 1999; Mulyadi 2004). However, the non-commercial artists' community, such as the political cartoonists, is well-known in the Malaysian comics and cartoon industry, where popularity and commercial success is not their primary goal but rather, as a platform to speak the "truth" as seen through the works of political advocate, Zunar.

While Malaysia has a flourishing history of comics and cartoons, a recognisable format that makes the art style "local" is almost difficult to identify compared to styles in American and Japanese comics. This is because the Malaysian comics and cartoons industry is much smaller in scale and possesses a multicultural history (such as Malaysian-Chinese and Malay-specific comics/cartoon community), limiting its potential to construct such form. However, one particular facet of the Malaysian comics and cartoons is noticeable through its locally-specific reference. The local specific categorisations are as follows :

Characters

In Malaysian comics and cartoons, characters' ethnicity plays a critical part in establishing a connection with the audience. In Lat's works, stereotypes or codes such as a low bridge nose for the Malay, small eyes for the Chinese, and a dot (*bindi*) on the forehead for the Indians may be seen, where repetition of these codes establishes "identity." A Malay character, for example, will bear the characteristics of a low bridge nose through a simplified drawing of a 'w'. Chinese are characterised by small 'dots' to imitate small eyes and long, higher nose bridges for Caucasians. As evidenced in the portrayals of national costumes on the characters, such as the *hijab* for Muslims and the *Sari* dress for Indians, costumes are the most effective indicator of various cultural backgrounds.

Facial expression and body language

Characters are defined by their quirky personalities, aside from the emphasis on ethnic depiction. The whacky personalities are presented through caricatured facial expressions, postures and gestures. This visualised gag was most popular during the establishment of comics' periodicals such as *Gila-Gila* and *Ujang*. These characters are mostly drawn in such a way to represent its humorous nature further and to compliment its comedic narrative. While most characters that adapt this gag visual and narrative are drawn comically, attractive characters' traits are kept for the female romantic interests of the male protagonists. The characters usually feature minimal facial expressions and are presented as mysterious and unattainable.

Settings

The emphasis on the local setting is another distinguishing trait of Malaysian comics and cartoons. Noticeable indications towards Malaysian geography can be seen through the architectural designs, vegetation and specific local landscapes that point towards its origin. Its settings are sometimes mentioned in the text or visual aspect

(such as the name of roads found in Malaysia); however, some artists prefer to keep the setting ambiguous, although indications towards its localities are visually present. The settings are primarily portrayed in two particularities : urban and rural settings. For urban settings, modern architecture plays a defining role in determining its location, using iconic landmarks such as the Petronas Towers and Kuala Lumpur Tower. On the other hand, rural landscapes are characterised by images of less developed areas such as village houses, paddy fields, coconut trees, to name a few, as part of the representation of Malaysia *kampung*.

Themes

While humour and gag is a genre popularly adopted by Malaysian comics and cartoons creators, they are mostly universal in nature to cater to its national scope without focusing on the specific taste of the communities. On the other hand, Malaysian creators feature universal themes by telling stories inspired by Malaysians. While most local comics and cartoons portray different types of local-inspired narratives, the nature of the published works, for the most part, does not possess a deeper meaning and is lightly themed in nature. One of the reasons for the adaptation of such a theme is the specified format featured in their works. For humour comics, most artists adapted one page “loose”² or two page-long “loose” format. These comics functions as an in-between for other long-series pages in the magazine. This limits these artists’ ability to delve deeper into such themes in their works.

‘Nostalgia’ and the ‘past vs the present’ is another popular theme adapted by Malaysian artists in contrast to the effects of globalisation. The emphasise on the aspect of “cherishing the memory” of the good old days dominates the narratives of these artists through their memoirs, and diary-style comics exhibit a more straightforward portrayal of Malaysian life. These characterisations stem from applying “local” specifications towards the Malaysian comics and cartoons, where we will briefly discuss how “local” identity is presented in Malaysian works during the pre Independence era until this day.

² The term “loose” here is used to define the nature of the comics : light-themed comics (from personal experience working for MOY Publications). The term “loose” itself, is derived from the English-equivalent ‘loose’ which has been adapted into the Malay-English slang in reference towards the comics being casual.

One of the salient characteristics of “Malaysian local style” is the specific reference towards the ethnic groups in Malaysia, with specifications towards the cultural icons relating to the physical appearance, costume, settings and narrative aspect. This characteristic demonstrates the importance of highlighting ones’ cultural background in such works. While the international aspects in the traditional art style seldom discourse, Manga and anime-like works received different reception by critics. The contrasting appearance of Manga and anime makes local-inspired works stand out, prompting for the claim of identity representations from these works, the ideas of which are shared by comics critics such as Dwi Koendoro and John Lent (Mahamood, 2010). The Manga phenomenon in Asia has resulted in artists interpreting Manga aesthetics in various ways, depending on the Manga they consume. Ultimately, this leads to the labelling of the works as departing from the “Malaysian local style” for the new “Malaysian Manga” art style.

3 Manga as a Style : Is it just Visual Representations?

To grasp the term “Manga” in the context of Malaysia, it is necessary first to comprehend what the term “Manga” entails. I should clarify that although “Manga” refers to the direct translation of the term “Japanese comics,” in the world of artists and comics publishers, it is known for a specific format and graphic narratives originating from Japan. Hence, any Malaysian comics that possess Manga format traits can be categorised as “Malaysian Manga”. But what is “style”? In conservative online dictionary entries, art style refers to “the style of a particular artist or school or movement; an imaginative orchestral idiom” (The free dictionary) by stating examples of art movements such as the Baroque, Classicism, Rococo, amongst others, as examples. From this definition, art styles can be categorised according to the style of a period, the distinctive and recognisable look, and the philosophy behind a particular style. However, in the case of Manga, Manga proper has undergone a historically long process of changes and is characterised by different types of specifications that target a specific group. Thus, to use the definition from art historical background would be problematic in defining Manga as a style. As explained by Jaqueline Berndt, Manga can be distinguished from other forms of graphic narratives by the institutional and commercial framework within which it is produced (Berndt, 2007). She continues to define the Manga proper as : “Manga-like or typically Manga, the conventions, formats,

and characteristics of different types of Manga are distinguished by the system that stems from it” is known as “mangaesque” (Berndt, 2012). In Japan, Manga is serialised in weekly comics magazines that cater to specific gender and age groups, for which editors play an important role to determine the types of stories being published. Due to Japan’s large comics industry and consistent production chain, identifiable manga conventions and characteristics have been formed. The term “Manga” in Malaysia is seen as a “style” by fans/producers.

There have been multiple research on “reading” Manga. Berndt acknowledges the fourth generation of critics, the formalist Japanese Manga critics (Berndt 2010), to invite critical discourse on Manga and Comics Studies. Berndt quoted two names who established the investigation of Manga representational conventions, namely Yomota Inuhiko and Natsume Fusanosuke. According to Natsume, Manga is more or less a reservoir of such conventional signs (Kentaro and Fusanosuke, 1993), but readers usually do not notice that as these conventions lean on a tacit and unconscious agreement” (Kentaro Takekuma & Fusanosuke Natsume, 1995 : 3). Natsume Fusanosuke, together with Takekuma Kentaro, is known for the influential book *Manga no Yomikata* (How to Read Manga), which can be described as the first systematic attempt at exploring the grammatical system of narrative Manga. A formal analysis of Japanese Manga expressions is established by exploring specific expressions of Japanese Manga via panel structure, motion lines, images as texts, and so forth. Natsume continues his documentation of systematic Manga expression (*manga hyogen*) with *Manga wa naze omoshiroi noka* (Why is Manga Fascinating?) and other publications he discusses a formalist approach to Manga’s form³.

Neil Cohn is another researcher who contributes to Japanese Visual Language (JVL) by looking at Manga as a “language”. According to Cohn, the “Manga style” can be identified by several characteristics, namely standard JVL (such as repetition of features of a character, including big eyes, small mouth, and pointed chin), Graphic Meanings (iconic representations of non-conventional visual symbols and metaphors such as gigantic sweat drop conveying embarrassment or nervousness, and kinetic lines to portray movement), and JVL Grammar (such panels sequence) (Cohn, 2007). Although Cohn’s discussion on “Manga as a language” is enlightening, this research limits Manga’s characteristics to only the visual and excludes the notion of Manga

³ Natsume, Fusanosuke『マンガはなぜ面白いのか—その表現と文法』(NHKライブラリー(66), Japan : 日本放送出版協会,1997), pp.15-139.

as narrative and ultimately as a medium. What makes Manga a Manga is the format itself, such as how the comics are printed and read from left to right, which contributes to the formation of Manga as a style, and its characteristics. However, Cohn's works can be an informative introduction to understand Manga as a style and as a narrative.

While the earlier discussions focus on Manga as a “style”, I would like to redirect the attention in exploring Manga's potential as a “medium”. In 2012, Berndt discussed the work of Keiji Nakazawa's Manga *Barefoot Gen* (1973-87) and its animated versions (1983 and 1986) in relation to the nuclear issue in Japan. Using Manga, artists have been writing stories “which hold the potential for political readings” (Berndt, 2012 : 149). Suter (2017) contributed to this discourse with her essay on Manga as a medium for historical debate, where she analysed Manga which is perceived as both entertaining and educational⁴. Both Berndt and Suter explore Manga's potential as a medium through the interaction towards the works and audience, with Berndt stating the indifferent reactions from the audience towards Nakawaza's works. By involving the audience and looking at the reception analysis, this adds value to Manga's potential as a transcultural product as advocated by Ito Go in his discussion on Manga's reception in his *Tezuka is dead* (2015), where he relates the term *kyara*, a “proto-character” entity that turns into a complete *kyarakutaa* (character) once the reader identifies it as “human-like”.

4 Essay Manga :

Comics Inspired by Real-life Stories Drawn by Anyone for Everyone

‘Essay Manga’ is a growing genre in Japan and autobiographical in nature, whose authors and readers are adult women (Sugawa-Shimada, 2011). While Essay Manga is a popular genre in Japan, it does not have specific target readers outside of the Japanese market. However, Essay Manga can be compared to info-comics in the international market. In her article, Akiko Sugawa-Shimada defines Essay Manga by adapting Kazuma Yoshimura (2008)'s outlook. According to Yoshimura, Essay Manga differs from story manga in the sense of form, themes and artistic style. He continues, Essay Manga is published in small quantities, published in women magazines and magazines targeted to a general readership, and published in an A5 or B5 comics.

⁴ Rebecca Suter, Manga : a medium for historical debate? Published 10 November, 2017 : <http://asaa.asn.au/manga-medium-historical-debate/> (Last access, 2021.11.20).

The themes of Essay Manga are mostly daily lives and artists' personal life experiences and are drawn in non-specific format and styles (Sugawa-Shimada, 2011). Essay Manga provides a space for their author to talk about important issues and sensitive subjects. For example, Ten Ten Hosokawa and Rieko Saibara talk about marital life and family struggles in their Essay Manga. Sugawa-Shimada (2011) explores the role of Japanese women and their struggles negotiating norms and social expectations through the works of these artists. Hosokawa illustrates her life with her husband, who is dealing with depression in *My Partner Became Depressed* (*Tsure ga Utsu ni Narimashite*), while Saibara talks about her struggles with her alcoholic and dying husband in *Everyday Mother* (*Mainichi Kasan*). Male Manga artists also use a similar platform to help those who suffer from depression by sharing their personal life struggles as exemplified by Keiichi Tanaka's *Utsunuke : The people who survived the 'Tunnel' of Depression* (*Utsunuke : Utsu Tonnaru o Nuketa Hito-Tachi*). While these artists discuss social stigmas such as depression in a light and funny tone using the Essay Manga format, other Essay Manga artists choose to tell their non-specific, light in nature, daily life documentations. Genre ranging from hobbies, pets, food, parenting, among others, are some of the popular topics adapted by these artists, as seen in the comics essay website in Japan⁵. Upon a quick look, the comics featured on the website are drawn loosely, with sketch-like drawings, and the simple camera works for each comics panel. Most are painted in a uniform or identical tone with a hue and features a pastel colour palette.

While there is no specific format for Essay Manga, competitions and awards might aid in developing a theme or format. This is evident through the comics competition held by the Comic Essay website. The Kadokawa Corporation website offered an annual comics award for people with publication potential. The Comic Essay Petit Award is an Essay Comic competition held twice a year in February and August, with a reward worth 100,000 yen and the opportunity to publish the winning entries. As mentioned on the website, the organiser encouraged those who can depict personal stories from different experiences such as relationships, daily life activities or life struggles, even though applicants may not have any work experience in comics-making. The organiser's tips and suggestions, such as the technical aspect of drawing comics and making wonderful stories, also serve as a template for artists to develop their essay comics stories. With the hope to win the award prize money and the chance to publish works

⁵ <https://www.comic-essay.com/> (Last access, 2021.11.28).

with Kadokawa, the reception of the website is highly positive, with over 1000 comic entries on the website and over 200 entries for the latest Comic Essay Petit Award.

While Essay Manga has grown in popularity among amateur artists in recent years, popular Manga artists in Japan have developed their own Essay Manga based on personal experiences prior to the Essay Manga phenomenon. Famous manga artists such as Azuma Hideo, Ito Junji and Keiichi Tanaka created Essay comics inspired by their real-life stories. As discussed earlier, Keiichi Tanaka talks about his struggles with depression. Ito Junji departed from his usual horror-themed comics and created stories about his two cats, Yon and Mu. Lastly, Azuma Hideo, popularly known for his science fiction lolicon-themed works, wrote an autobiographical Manga about his alcohol dependency problems. The similarities which can be found in these three works reveals how these artists, who already have a fan base and an established art style, took a different route by drawing a different theme inspired by their personal experience. In particular, Ito Junjo's work exhibits a distinct transition from his horror-themed Manga to comical, in which he used two main artistic styles throughout the Manga : realistic and exaggerated horror interchangeably.

5 Multimodalities in Essay Manga : Social Semiotics Analysis of Hosokawa Tenten and Azuma Hideo Works

Previously, we can see that the popularity of Essay Manga was attributed to the publisher's efforts to promote the genre through competitions and the possibility to work as a full-fledged artist. Moreover, Essay Manga could be a way for well-known Manga artists to move away from their typical themes in comics by creating stories based on true events. These two instances show two different artists' art styles of professional Manga work of Azuma's and an amateurish-art style of Hosokawa. Here, I investigate these two comics from a social semiotics theory perspective. The two comics; Hosokawa Tenten's *My Partner Became Depressed* Azuma Hideo's *Disappearance Diary*, represent Essay Manga from actual life events which are presented in different art styles. Hosokawa Tenten's works feature a black and white Manga with loosely drawn lines. Her artworks feature minimal background design where the characters and speech bubbles are predominant in each comic panel. At times, her works resemble children drawings. On the other hand, Azuma Hideo's works are more mature as a result of his professional experience as an established Manga artist

in Japan. Unlike Hosokawa, Azuma's line art is more precise. Unlike Hosokawa's more plain comics, his work is monochromatic and heavily reliant on screen-tones. Azuma is known for his cute lolicon characters found in his portrayal of female leads. His male characters are also drawn in a cute appearance and *chibi*-like proportions. His attention to detail can be seen through his background illustrations, which features a semi-realistic portrayal of Japanese landscapes. Both artists' works contrast from one another but are similar in their Essay manga-themed comics. These comics were identified as exemplary texts for this study for several reasons. First, the narratives in these pages are relevant because they could relate to readers' lives by tackling taboo themes within a society : depression and alcohol dependency. Second, authored and illustrated by single creators, these Manga features two different art styles. Finally, the themes inherent in these narratives worked together in interlocking ways, promoting critical conversations across and between texts.

My Partner Became Depressed by Hosokawa Tenten looked at depression through the eyes of a mentally healthy wife who is taking care of her depressed husband. The Manga centred around her depressed husband's day-to-day shenanigans and ways for her and her husband to cope with having a family member suffering mental health issues. Hosokawa's depiction of her daily life as a wife with a depressed husband is comedic, and so is the comical portrayal of both characters. Hosokawa juggles her life and navigates her daily activities whilst taking care of his clinically depressed husband shows a rather comedic situation. Her simplistic, light story-telling contrasts the serious theme she adapted in her Manga, which makes it an easy reading material. While her art style is rather simplistic, this gives her the advantage to discuss the issue of depression in a light manner. This could also explain why her Manga is well received by her fans. Plus, it has also been adapted into TV series and movies. Here, the contrast between the light visual and a rather heavy narrative in story-telling serves as a recurring format found in many Essay Manga.

Azuma's *Disappearance Diary* resembles Hosokawa's contrasting elements of light versus heavy theme in their visual and narrative. While Azuma's art style appears more professionally done, his characters' cute and comedic appearance is the opposite of many serious issues discussed in the story of Azuma's personal experience with alcohol dependency. The author, the main character, is drawn as a stubby young man struggling with financial problems, which result in him being homeless and abandoning his family. His financial circumstances do not prevent him from getting drunk and

favouring his alcohol craving over his meals. Azuma portrays the main character as nonchalant, who is indifferent about his precarious situation. This gives the impression that his problems with alcohol are part of his everyday life. As a result, the story is written in a light and monotone manner.

In both works, the visual and textual relationships are comparable in the sense that both artists addressed a serious topic in a light, carefree manner. By adopting this type of style in the Manga, readers can enjoy the story from a neutral stance. This is perhaps a way for artists to disassociate readers from feeling sorry for the authors as they share their personal struggles with the audience. From my own experience and observation as a reader, I feel conflicted by feeling guilty that I enjoyed reading the authors' struggles. The contrasting elements between the visuals and texts of these comics made Essay Manga a multi-functional medium to disseminate information to the public, without needing to discuss the theme heavily, as shown in Hosokawa's more recent works covering developmental problems like ADHD and autism.

6 Conclusion

The discussion of Manga as an art style in Malaysia has mainly been about its visual conventions, as seen through my research (Nasir, 2019). This analysis contributes to the discussion about how Essay Manga constructs style and local identity in art and the extent to which and how visual and text generate or constrain 'new' spaces for identity work and/or reinforce social conventions. By looking at Essay Manga, as presented in this study, the multimodal aspect of text and visuals can create space for neutral communicative means. Essay Manga authors have the freedom to write stories that are personal and meaningful to them while having the ability to communicate with their readers. Moreover, Essay Manga readers find joy in reading stories that are dear to them. Manga's multi-facets usage made this medium a multimodal literary reference to discuss personal and cultural issues and making-meaning in communicating the social process.

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