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# The Functions of Panels (*koma*) in Manga: An essay by Natsume Fusanosuke

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## Abstract

Natsume Fusanosuke presents in this essay the core ideas of his formal ‘theory of expression’ (*manga hyōgen-ron*) that focuses on three basic elements of manga: words, pictures, and frames. In the 1990s, Natsume emerged as a seminal scholar of Manga Studies, whose influential works include *Manga no yomikata* (coauthored, 1995) and *Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono hyōgen to bunpō* (1997), where the present essay is found. Here, Natsume describes the central aspects of panel constructions in manga: creating a sense of order for the reader by segmenting time; shaping the reader’s mental perceptions by panel compression (*asshuku*) and release (*kaihō*); and, making a symbolic space within the frame. For Natsume, manga artists in the 1960s, most notably Ishinomori Shōtarō, pioneered these techniques during this seminal and creative period of manga, effectively establishing the techniques that all manga artists have used since then. In this culminating chapter from his groundbreaking 1997 work, Natsume describes how these artists made manga more ‘interesting’ (*omoshiroi*) by transforming and leveraging the formal aspects of the manga page and the layout of panels in order to both generate new psychological effects and greater reader involvement with the story’s characters and its mood.

**Keywords:** manga, pop culture, panel constructions, *asshuku*, *kaihō*, Ishinomori Shōtarō, Bon Bon, manga techniques, Natsume Fusanosuke

## 1. Translator's Introduction

Natsume Fusanosuke (1950- ), a leader in manga studies since the 1990s, really needs no introduction for scholars of contemporary Japanese culture. Author, comic-book artist, columnist, critic, scholar, educator, television personality—he is well known by all of these titles—not to mention that he is also the grandson of Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), the great Meiji novelist. Beginning with cartoons and comics for magazines like the Weekly Asahi in the 1970s, by the 1990s Natsume went from making manga to writing about manga. From his early experiments in manga criticism, such as his idiosyncratic but very enjoyable *Mangagaku* (Yamato Shobō, 1985), Natsume went on to trailblaze a new approach to manga scholarship with *Manga no yomikata* (*[How to Read Manga]*, Takarajima-sha, 1995), a co-authored work but one that largely consists of Natsume’s ground-breaking contributions. Within a year after that, he developed those ideas further for the NHK education television show *Ningen daikgaku* (Human University), which was broadcast from July 4 to September 23, 1996. His twelve-episode weekly series, *Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono bunpō to hyōgen* (Why Is

Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression), was accompanied by a reader's guide, which he later expanded and re-published in the following year under the same title (NHK Library, 1997). The present essay is the tenth chapter of part one of that book. Although widely acknowledged in Japanese- and English-language Comic Studies for his central role in the field, it is surprising how few of Natsume's works or essays appear in English, given how often Natsume's works are cited but under-used in manga scholarship. Our translation seeks to amend that. Our effort here is just one of many translations and discussions of Natsume's work that have appeared recently in those fields [1].

This essay is the culminating chapter, Chapter 10, in *Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka*, where he states the three principal functions of panels in manga: (1) to create a sense of order for the reader by segmenting time; (2) to shape the reader's mental perceptions by panel compression and release; (3) to create a symbolic space within the frame, often conveying information about the pictures within them.

One finds a parallel in this essay to the most important discussion in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), his third chapter on panel closure ('Blood in the Gutter'), where McCloud categorised 'six types of panel transitions' and then used those categories to characterise the different types of comic books produced in America, Europe, and Japan, suggesting that we can use the categories to index cultural trends in comic book storytelling (70-79). Although their approaches to panel analysis are completely different, both writers are extremely influential in their domains of comics and manga studies. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* has been widely translated into multiple languages (in Japanese, twice: 1998 and 2020), yet Natsume's full 'theory of expression' (*hyōgen-ron*) perspective on manga panels as a Japanese creator and reader has been unavailable in English until now. Natsume's view of manga has greatly expanded over time, but to understand the arc of his theory, one should start with his own place of departure, which has advantages because of its immediate accessibility. Although the ideas in this chapter essay can be found in the precursor text, *Manga no yomikata* (168-183), we disagree with Ingulsrud and Allen, who argued that the *Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka* 'fall[s] short of replacing the analytical breadth of *Manga no yomikata*' (53). On the contrary, the form of the present essay has a more robust and straightforward discussion of the same ideas.

Students in our manga classes at Portland State University have greatly appreciated and skillfully deployed Natsume's 'theory of expression' approach in their page and panel analyses; they have often favoured Natsume's way of panel interpretation over McCloud's approach, which is *de rigueur*—or in some cases, moribund—in *Comics Studies*. Neil Cohn, for example, offers an alternative to McCloud's and one more closely related to Natsume's approach. 'Instead of looking at the limited range of one panel's immediate linear juxtapositions, panels can combine to form larger structures in hierarchic embeddings,' or the manga 'grammar' of what Cohn calls 'Japanese Visual Language' (2010, 196; see also 2013, 153-171). As seen in the present essay, Natsume uses a whole-page or even a double-page spread view in his analysis. Masami Toku argues, 'Natsume's greatest achievement is his method of analysing manga as visual components that he calls the grammar of manga' (Toku 134). McCloud himself calls his own categorisation of panel transitions 'the grammar of comics,' but scholars like Cohn and Toku seek a larger and more rigorous analysis model for visual study of manga,

which leads us back to Natsume. Regardless of the viability of McCloud's 'six types' of panel transitions for analysis for comics universally, Natsume's approach with its three principal functions is one developed by a member of the target culture and a manga cognoscenti, and that is why it has much to offer scholars and students of Japanese comics. In their analyses of manga both classic (those of Tezuka Osamu, Mizuki Shigeru, Hagio Moto) and contemporary (those of Noda Satoru, Oshimi Shūzō, Yoshinaga Fumi), our students greatly gravitated to Natsume's twin principle of 'compression' (*asshuku*) and 'release' (*kaihō*), especially as it aids in seeing the story across the full two-page (*mi-hiraki*) spread.

Although one sees contemporary American comics increasingly published today with less advertisements and more two-page spreads, in domestic comics before the early 1990s—and thus many of the comics McCloud was using for comparators—advertisements or in-house announcements would occupy part of or a whole page within two-page spreads. Thus panel-to-panel closure by comprehension in McCloud's units of two panels on a single page may have been more dominant than the kind of closure across the full two-page spread, which Natsume describes, in the Japanese case. Natsume's description of Japanese reading expectations—driven by manga artists' compositional innovations from the 1960s onward—provide a more appropriate cultural match for Japanese manga than McCloud's reading model. It should be noted that in the subsequent chapter on shōjo manga, Natsume describes a rejection of these classical forms of sequential panels in favour of a 'layered,' or non-sequential, approach that stresses the feelings, or interiority, of the girls' comics protagonists. Yet the rejection of these classic techniques does not invalidate them nor the method of analysis in the present essay. On the contrary, it is all the more important to grasp the basic principles of panel functions that Natsume discovered in order to understand how girls' comics artists in the 1970s and later more contemporary manga artists deformed the classic style and innovated their approaches to constructing manga panels in stories we see today.

Even though more sophisticated forms of analysis have been developed since the 1990s—and thus since McCloud's and Natsume's initial analytical forays—to measure and interpret comic narrative elements, Natsume's early work here demands our attention. Not only does this translation of this essay provide a foundation for authentic analysis of target culture by a member of that culture, but Natsume's essay is a keystone in the history of manga studies from the 1990s—given its development for NHK television, one can say it was the most visible example of manga scholarship for that time. Although Natsume himself felt the need to later contextualise and further frame his early efforts, he acknowledges that his 1990s writing, like this early essay, created a pivot in the 'transformation' of manga studies by 2001 (2004b, 365). 'The development period,' he wrote in 2004, 'for my true manga criticism (*honkaku-teki na manga hihyō katsudō*)' dates from his 1992 work *Tezuka Osamu wa doko ni iru* (Where Is Tezuka Osamu?) through *Manga no yomikata* and *Manga wa naze omoshiori no ka* until 1998 with the publication of *Tezuka Osamu no bōken* (The Adventures of Tezuka Osamu) (2004a, 221) [2].

Natsume's approach to manga analysis in *Why Is Manga So Interesting?* is what he calls a 'theory of expression' that looks at three basic elements of manga: words, pictures, and frames. Natsume and other manga critics in the 1990s, Jaqueline

Berndt writes, 'pioneered this movement... [by] conceiv[ing the manga creator] as a talented craftsman who conveys meaning through drawing and through guiding the reader's gaze via panel arrangements' (304). Our translations of other chapters from this book include the author's 'theory of expression' discussion of words ('The Characteristics of Japanese Manga'), words as pictures ('The Power of Onomatopoeia in Manga'), and panels (the present essay) [3]. Of those chapters, the first for the later Natsume is the most problematic. Less than a decade later, Natsume considered that some of his theoretical underpinnings in *How to Read Manga* and *Why Is Manga So Interesting?* had veered too closely to the 'dangers' (*kikinsei*) of cultural essentialism and nationalism, so he began to re-address those ideas at least by 2000 [4]. He elsewhere noted he was 'inaccurate,' [5] but more importantly Natsume worried that his argument about the origins of the manga panel would inadvertently promote a Japan-first ethnocentrism, which he did not intend. If one did assert the manga panel could be traced back at least to the Edo-period *kibyōshi* (yellow-cover booklets), how could one then reconcile influence on Japanese artists from the early cartoons imported from the West during the Meiji period? [6] And while Natsume did change his views on the origins of Japanese manga, he did not feel compelled to revise the basic functions of manga panel that he outlines in the present essay. In other words, although the cultural context of his theory in the 1990s seemed problematic, the principles of formal manga 'expression' he asserted then in this essay still hold currency in his theory today.

As Natsume continued to expand his theory of manga from the late 1990s, he maintained his foundational 'theory of expression' while adding larger elements such as reader reception and publisher-artist relationships. In the 'Afterword' of his 2004 collection of 'manga columns' (*manga korumu*), he argued that these more recent essays reflected an 'expansion of [theoretical] space' (*ryōiki kakudai*) and a 'development of his awareness of [theoretical] problems' (*mondai ishiki no hatten*) but that they of course still maintained a 'retrenchment of [my] expression theory' (*hyōgenron-shinka*) (2004b, 365). Another aspect of his 1990s approach that has remained constant in Natsume's work is his insistence on feeling 'interested' or enjoying the 'interesting' (*omoshiroi*) aspects of manga, which is, after all, a form of mass-media entertainment (2004b, 366). If one of the sins of 1990s manga scholars, like Natsume, was to over-emphasise the formal 'mechanisms of reading manga,' and 'turn manga criticism into a reassuring, rather than a disturbing, area of discourse,' as Jaqueline Berndt argues, which ultimately 'veered away from discussing manga in terms of content or politically sensitive issues' (304-305), then it seems Natsume himself has repented, noting the 'lack of responsibility' (*musekininsa*) in his causal approach to writing about manga, even while insisting that manga critics should still be allowed to follow what they find is 'interesting' (*omoshiroi*) (2004b, 366). Without the latter, he writes, it might be impossible for scholars to overcome the increasingly strict bounds imposed by academia if they were to try pursuing their bold, new hypotheses. For Natsume, the casual, 'interesting' essay-like approach affords writers an opportunity to go beyond the limits of academic writing and to test their bold hypotheses, but he insists that such writers still can be criticized. When we discuss manga, we should acquire both of these academic and casual approaches to try to be responsible but also 'fun' (*omoshiroi*). Writing this in 2004, Natsume published in the same year a companion study of manga, *Mangagaku e no chosen* (Challenges to the Study of Manga), which shows that he could be fully engaged in more responsible academic study at the same time he wrote 'irresponsible' manga criticism columns. 'This book contains the

theory (*gainen*) and I wrote it as I was compiling in the same year my *Manga no fukayomi, otona-yomi*, which is a corresponding application text (*ōyōhen*) for the theory in this book' (2004a, 223). We believe that the present essay, with its sometimes 'irresponsible' emphasis on the 'interesting' 'expression' of manga, will nonetheless help readers appreciate the origins of Natsume's theory of manga as he trailblazed a path of manga studies from the late 1990s, one which he later refined and bifurcated as he met the challenges of the more complex field after 2001.

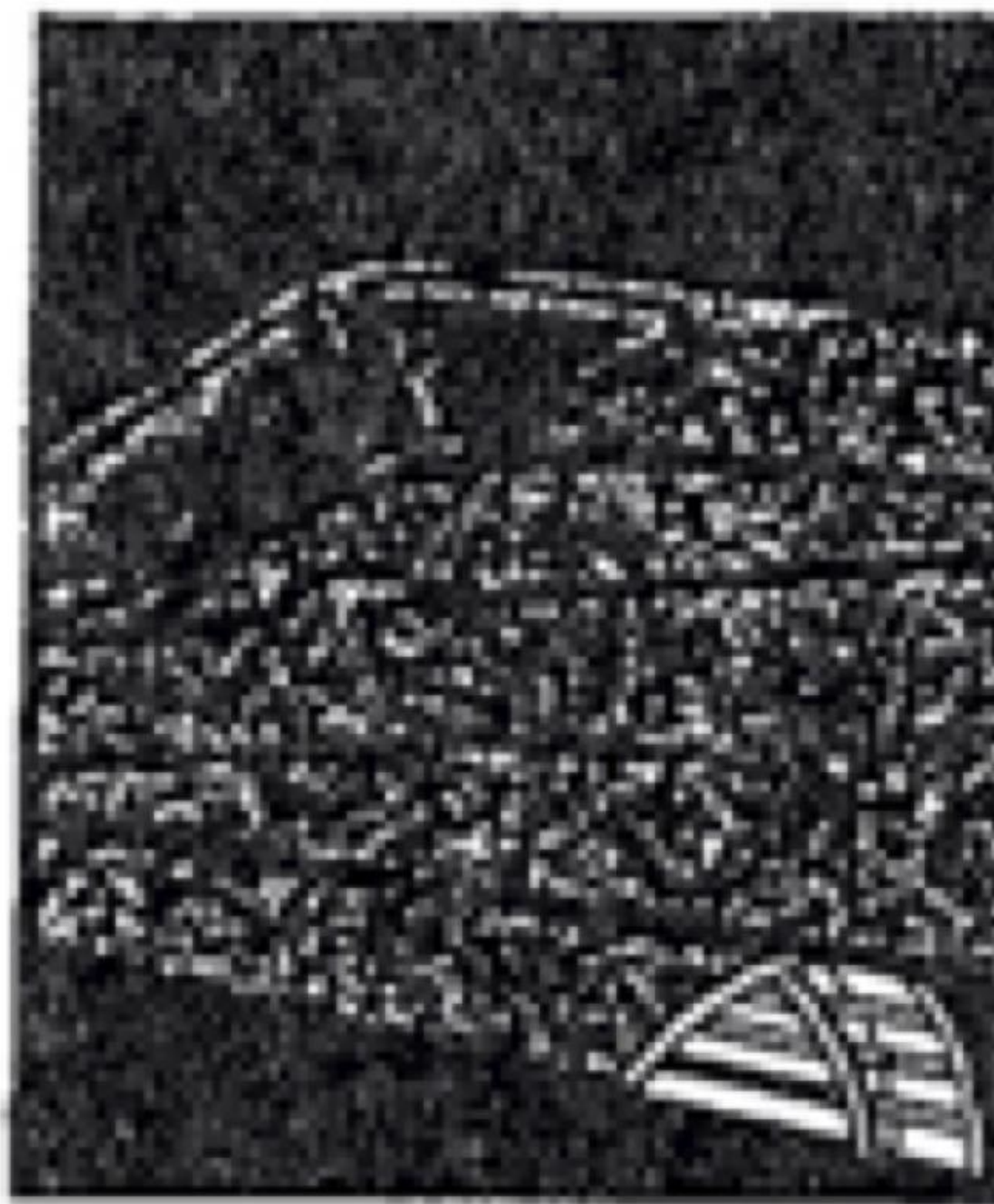
The translators wish to thank Natsume-sensei for his permission to translate and publish his work in English. We also greatly appreciate the generosity of the manga artists and publishers who fully granted use of their images.

## **The Functions of Panels (*Koma*) in Manga.**

### **Skillful Panel Construction in Ishinomori's Manga: How to Lead the Reader's Eye**

A great way to think about the functions of manga panels is to look at the Ishinomori Shōtarō's 1965-1968 series, *Bon Bon* (Figure 1). It is a comic story from over thirty years ago. The title character Bon Bon is a weird, psychic kid who came from somewhere unknown and lives in the backyard of a very rich boy named Gonta. Each story usually develops with a series of nonsense gags between the two boys. For a quite a while Ishinomori had been drawing these funny comics with his dry sense of humour. Ishinomori thus preceded the gag-manga craze in Japan.

More importantly, when you look at his works, from the point of his panel constructions, it is obviously the work of a master. *Bon Bon* has the touch of a textbook model of panel composition. In this two-page spread example, Gonta has been abducted by a gang of spirits and ensconced in a Western-style mansion. We begin the scene with Bon Bon coming up on the place as he tracks down Gonta. Let us take a look at Ishinomori's panel sequences.





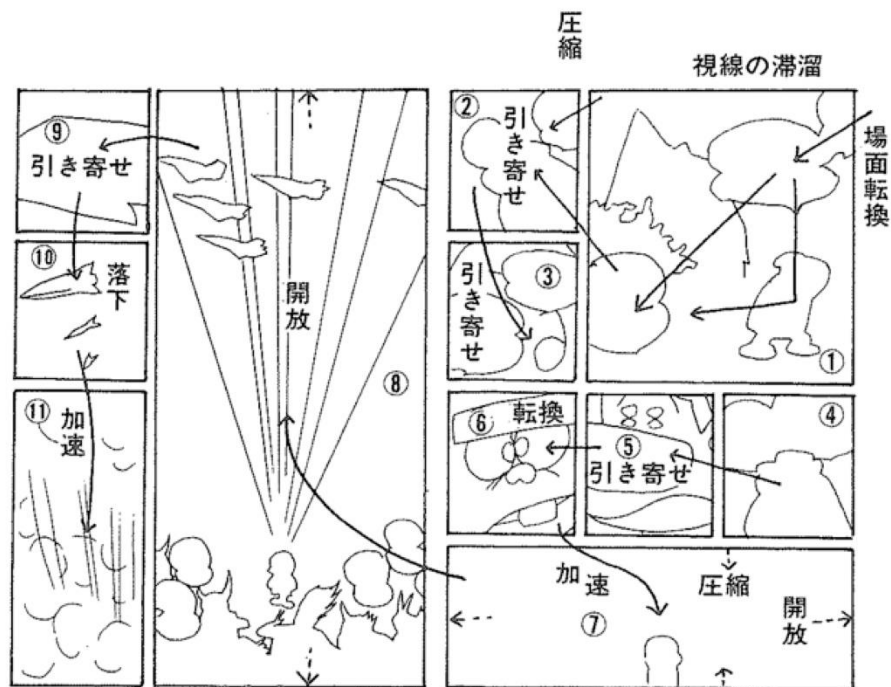


**Figure 1.** A splendid example of panel construction in a two-page spread (*mi-hiraki*).

(Ishinomori Shōtarō, *Bon Bon*, 1965-1968 Manga-ō)

First, the reader would come to this two-page spread from the previous page. His eye begins in the top right of the right page. This is exactly at the moment when there has been a scene shift. We are at this moment when Bon Bon, our psychically-powered protagonist, gazes at the stage where our next event will play out. The artist uses a relatively large square panel here and so it is a trick to make the reader's eye come to an unconscious halt.

Within that first page, the reader's eye first goes to the back of our protagonist. Within about the same time, the reader scans his word bubble. His speech hints at the upcoming event as well as the location of where the event will play out, so as the reader progresses from right to left over the speech balloons, the reader will end up naturally gazing over the entire building (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The effects of panel compression and release.

The reader both looks at the picture of the protagonist and reads the words he says. In doing so, the reader psychologically gets closer to our protagonist in an unconscious way. In other words, we read *Bon Bon*, joining in with

him along the way. The shift we feel getting closer to his psychology happens naturally as we are carried along, getting pulled into the close-up panel on Bon Bon's face in that next small square on the top left of that page. It really compels us to grow closer to him—to what he is feeling. Bon Bon says, 'Whaa?' and he intuits that something is happening to his friend Gonta. As a result, at the same time we as readers, too, expect that something is happening.

When the reader's eye moves from Panel One to Panel Two like this, there is a one-quarter reduction in the size of these square panels and so it is expected that reader feels something is closing down on our vision all the sudden. This sense of compression (*asshuku*) compels us psychologically to enter into the mind of the protagonist. At the same time, the scenery disappears. The reader's line of sight thus gets turned around so we are facing the protagonist and what follows is a slight change in feeling. The artist takes us from a psychological sense of distance (actually viewing things from afar) and then he gives us a small preview, allowing the reader to think, 'Okay, now we're going to understand what's happening inside that house.'

In the third panel we have yet another square shape just like in our second panel. This time we get an even tighter close-up on Bon Bon's ear and some lines of speech that describe the event happening in the mansion that Bon Bon can somehow hear. The two panels are the same shape, but in this third one we approach Bon Bon's ear, so the reader is pulled inside the picture. And we feel a kind of empathy with the protagonist. We feel his hunch, knowing that something terrible is happening to Gonta.

The middle row of panels, where we pick up with Panel Four, shows our protagonist from the waist up. He will be in close-up again in the fifth panel. Judging from the text in that fourth panel, the reader understands that our psychic Bon Bon's eye sees something with his expanded consciousness and is mentally focusing on something.

Here again we have a group of panels that all are the same size, all lined up in a row. After a slight change with Panel Two, Ishinomori has drawn the same character throughout all these panels. There is no background here. The reader gets effectively sucked into the character, but Ishinomori does it so smoothly not to make the reader feel any gap or contrast. The reader will feel a similar consistent pattern of time that runs throughout those square panels. The effect of lining up similar square panels is done in order to emphasise the time it takes naturally to pull (*hikiyose*) the reader's gaze into his character with the regularity of these square shapes.

However, even though the panels have the exact same size, right before the row ends, we have a sudden switch to another character in the sixth [square] panel as the artist swaps one close-up of Bon Bon with that of Gonta who is located inside the mansion. Given that the reader had started to grow closer to Bon Bon in a natural way, this has to feel like a sudden betrayal. Plus, the audience realises all the sudden they are stuck in the mansion now, too.

The sequence of Panels Five and Six involves a scene change, but without creating a gap by changing the size of the panels.

The artist intentionally uses the same size and shape panel here in the sixth panel. By doing so, Ishinomori does not make us feel a sudden break like you experience if you had turned the previous page and come to our page's Panel One here. Instead, we have a shift happening that moves along at a nice pace where the separation of time is done in neat, uniform beats. And yet, it is the same level of psychological approximation that we felt with Bon Bon up to this point, so the reader must feel like he is suddenly thrown into Gonta's mind since we are immediately seeing him in close-up.

In other words, this happens because the space (*ma* 間) of the moment's swift change is created by lining up this row of similarly sized panels, further giving the impression to the reader of a sudden shift in the scene, and accelerating the sense of time in the reader's mind. Making these spatial beats (*ma*) like this in his panel composition shows just how superb an artist Ishinomori was.

The speeding up of the events for this part then becomes faster when we drop down to the page's bottom panel. With Panel Seven, we finally receive a complete transformation in the shape of the panel. The reader's field of vision vastly opens up on both the right and left sides as the frame stretches horizontally. The reader cannot help but feel a sudden openness or liberation (*kaihō*). The character in the panel is drawn small, which accentuates that horizontal sense of release (*kaihō*).

The average manga artist might change the size and shape of the panel with a scene pivoting at the fifth panel. If you did that, the transformation of the panel and the scene shift would have the same tone, and I expect that you would not get what you have here with Ishinomori. Namely, the reader would feel neither a rush of time shifting nor a sudden halt with a feeling of liberation after this long, extended compression. Because there is that one-panel gap between the scene change [Panels Five to Six] and the release [Panel Seven], readers feel the full impact of Ishinomori's 'pooling' (tame) momentum in those moments right before he suddenly releases them from that tension in Panel Seven.

The bottom panel gives off a sense of release, which spreads horizontally. And yet, with its lateral expansion, the feeling one has going down vertically from the top panels to the bottom is compression (*asshuku*). We feel both compression and release because, for one thing, the bottom panel is a long rectangular shape and also because it is located at the bottom of the page. In other words, even the reader's gaze can only be freed to a half extent. The answer to why that is so will be made clear as one gazes over to the opposing page.

On the left page, all of the sudden the panels are arranged in vertical shapes. The artist gives a drastic vertical release to the reader's gaze, which previously was hemmed in by the previous constraints of top-to-bottom compression. Such an incredible sense of release like this synchronises with the unfolding of events sensed by Bon Bon's psychic powers as he preternaturally envisions the event of the jets appearing in sky over Gonta's head. This open sense of vertical liberation is the feeling of ascension the reader also feels; it gives off a feeling of elation; Ishinomori totally creates the exquisite pleasure you can only find in manga with a two-page spread (*mi-hiraki*) here like this.

The three shorter panels that make up the left-hand side of the left page then invite the reader closely to examine in the more detail the event of the right-hand panel, which has the feeling of vertical release. The artist tricks the reader into associating that specific order: first aeroplanes, then the bombs, then an explosion! The direction of the reader's top-to-bottom scanning matches the flow of the story (the dropping of the bombs). There are no words of narration or dialogue and that is why our reading speeds up like the accelerating speed of the falling bombs. Ishinomori thus guides the reader through the construction of panels like this. As readers we feel no resistance. Rather, we marvel at how well it all flows.

## **How Panel Changes Create the Compression-and-Release Effect**

Of course, not everyone reads manga in this analytical way, so we can say that people absorb manga as a whole rather unconsciously. Even manga creators plan things out only half-consciously knowing what they are doing. It is just that when we describe it in words, it sounds convoluted. And yet, if we compare Ishinomori's to any manga from the prewar period, it is fairly obvious that a high level of panel organisation had finally become possible here, putting works like his far above those of his predecessors. That is also why we should expect any reader now to be able easily to master reading a highly dense work like *Bon Bon*. Certainly, the achievements by 1960s artists in their panel constructions carried over to the next generation, who developed manga even further.

We can thus abstract from the above analysis one of the most fundamental functions of panel organisation. There are two elements here: compression (*asshuku*) and release (*kaihō*). When you have differences in panel size, panel shape, and panel changes, they can create a contrast, namely, compression and release, and then you see the real fruit of manga—that is when manga gets so interesting (*omoshirosa*).

I will take it a step further and say that that Ishinomori's right hand page—with its upper to lower compression sense—and his left-hand page—with its release to the page top—work in tandem, corresponding with each other across the whole two-page spread (Figure 3). For any story manga, which can accumulate a great number of pages, the artist will draw it by calculating the compression and release effects in terms of them happening both per one-page unit and per two-page-spread unit.

左

入

一

一

**Figure 3.** The compression-release effect over a two-page unit. Compression increases towards the bottom of the right page and the release happens with the rise to the top of the left page. Originally published in *Manga no yomikata* (Takarajima-sha, 1995).

## **Panels and Their Function to Guide the Reader's Thinking**

Even so, in order to reach that goal of compression and release, the panels have to work according to a very large premise. Based on the arrangements of the panels, the reader will proceed following their temporal order. In other words, panels have the function of segmenting time. Without time, there is no compression-and-release effect possible. If we take our two-page spread's panels, and line them up in a straight row (Figure 4: right to left) following their temporal order, you can easily understand the contrasts in time we have discussed up to this point. When we line up and compare the sizes and height of the panels from the page, they start look like a bar graph.



爆發

**Figure 4.** Transformations in the panels as they follow the flow of time. [Additional notes: Introduction, Development, Turn, and Conclusion (*Ki-shō-ten-ketsu*). A time lag (*zure*) between the picture's visual accent beat and the story's accent beat (the explosion).]

Our time segmentation is arranged according to the way Japanese move forward with their reading by working from right to left. Long ago, when we had manga where the reading order was not completely determined, the artist and publisher would have to number each and every panel to aid reader progress (Figure 5). Such numbering became obsolete sometime around 1969 with magazines like *Weekly Shōnen Magazine*.





おたれしつて、  
おたれ

**Figure 5.** Panels numbered to establish reading order. (Sugiura Shigeru, *Apple Jam-kun* [*Appuru Jamu-kun*], 1950-1954, Omoshiro Book.)

By the way, I know that comics in Korea, America, and Europe are read the opposite way [from left to right], but comics in Hong Kong and Taiwan are read in the same way as manga is read in Japan, starting with the right top panel flowing down to bottom left one. Thus, people read comics according to the way they read text in their cultures. That is why in the manga first translated in the West, you would have right-handed pitchers flipped around, becoming left-handed ones (Figure 6).

THE  
MAGAZINE  
OF  
THE  
MOUNTAIN  
COUNTRY  
OF  
THE  
WEST



THE  
MOUNTAIN  
COUNTRY  
OF  
THE  
WEST



**Figure 6.** A pirate copy (left) from Thailand of Ōshima Yasuichi's *Batsu & Terī* (*Bats and Terry*, 1987) next to its Japanese original (right). Because Thais read from left to right, the manga has been flipped. In the Thai version, our right-handed pitcher now becomes left-handed; plus, the screen-tone words also end up reversed. (Ōshima Yasuichi, *Batsu & Terī*, 1987 Copyright Ōshima Yasuichi and Ōshima Productions.)

When you think about it, this difference can be quite important. For example, consider our original scene (Figure 1): the protagonist, as he grows more aware of the unfolding scene, is facing left in all the panels. He does this because manga established a complicit agreement with his reader, knowing the reader will read to the left as it is the direction to move forward, but one will always move to the right either to go backward or to return. And that is also why manga are drawn with the protagonists generally facing left when they are going towards an event in the future.

Now, I can only say that is true of Japanese manga here, but when it comes to Korean or Western comics I do not know if the opposite logic exists. Based on what I have seen thus far, I do not really know.

But take for example what the great abstract painter Kandinsky once wrote in his art treatise, *Point and Line to Plane* (1947; translated by Nishida Hideho, Bijutsu Shuppan 1959). He stressed that the picture plane fundamentally must have a sense of direction to it.

Left always indicates the far distance.

Right always indicates one's home [Z].

In other words, it is the same as it is in Japanese manga. Furthermore, in her book, *Introduction to Jungian Psychology* (Science-sha, 1982), Akiyama Satoko explains in her chapter 'The Way of Seeing Spatial Expressions' how she interprets her patients' free-hand drawings and miniature-garden [sandbox] play: 'In pictures where a character faces left, they tend to focus on the inner, unconscious realm; in one where things face right, there is a focus on the outside, on an outer reality.' Speaking of inner meaning in manga, it is common to have it break down like this: when you have situations where the focus is on inner meaning, the artists usually have the characters face right. So, when the characters deal with external reality, the artist tends to have them facing left. Even so, Akiyama's logic makes sense when we take the world of manga as an imaginary world, and the opposite is the world of our reality.

Whatever the case may be, I do not think we can fully understand what the meaning of direction is in comic-book panels and art. Maybe the Japanese have their own. Maybe each culture has its own approach. Or, maybe it is something we share in common across all of our cultures. But we will not fully understand things without comparing and contrasting Japanese comics and foreign comics with greater care, and bringing in the lessons from the research of other fields.

I think it is safe to say that if meaning is related to the upper and lower zones of space [in a picture] then that can be

something universal. Kandinsky wrote that the upper areas of the picture plane make us feel ‘something light in weight’ or ‘free’ or ‘loose’ and that the areas at the bottom of the picture plane would make us feel ‘constrained, something thick, something heavy.’ When we look at the vertically stretched panel in Figure 1, we notice that the artist utilises in this manga this opposing contrast in feeling of upper zone to lower zone. In one, a fighter jet appears in the top of the panel creating a light, open feeling; in its bottom portion, there is a darkly shaded mass of monsters and we feel like we are heavily tied down. In these long vertical panels, the artist brings out a certain feeling of tension as well as a kind of feeling of elation that occurs between the top and the bottom. In the three panels, where we see the scene of the bombing, Ishinomori gives us a feeling of elation and then follows it with a sense of falling—a total contrast. That is why he lined up these vertical panels the way he did.

So, the shape and the style of any artist’s panels will be affected by that person’s cultural codes with regards to the space in the left, the right, the top, and the bottom of the comic page. Again, we do not know if this could be something that we all share together as humans, or, perhaps we cannot say that. It might be cultural, and so panel meanings are distinct from region to region. But we can confidently say that these cultural codes play a pivotal role in manga expression as our unconscious spatial expression. This cultural code works at the individual panel level, but it also works at a higher level—the page itself—and then an even higher level, the two-page spread (*mi-hiraki*).

In conclusion then we can say this. The construction of manga panels has a function for pictures inside them and panels also have a function to segment those pictures. There are three functions of panel construction we have seen thus far:

- (1) panels function to segment time and thereby create a sense of order for the reader;
- (2) panels also have a compression and release function that shapes the reader’s mental perceptions;
- (3) panels limit the picture by their frames, creating a symbolic space that can provide additional meaning for the picture.

If I say that is all panels do, it seems like I have dispensed with things too easily, but Japanese manga panel constructions actually can be very diverse and quite complicated [8].

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, a ten-page summary of Natsume’s “grammar” approach to manga was published in *Manga!: Visual Pop-Culture in ARTS Education*, a volume of collected essays edited by Masami Toku and Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase (INSEA Publications, 2020), pp. 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts in English of *Tezuka Osamu wa doko ni iru* can be found in *Mechademia* (2013), pp. 89-107.

<sup>3</sup> Other translations of Natsume’s chapters can be found in the *International Journal of Comic Art* (forthcoming) and *U.S. Japan-Women’s Journal* (forthcoming).

4 Natsume published his self-critical essay in English in the March 2000 The Japan Foundation Newsletter, which he later published again in Japanese together with a detailed supplemental ‘Long Footnote’ (*Nagai jichū*), collected in *Manga no fuka-yomi, otona-yomi* (2004).

5 See Natsume’s introduction to the selected chapter translations of ‘Where Is Tezuka?: A Theory of Manga Expression’ in *Mechademia* (volume 1 no 8; p. 91).

6 Natsume, *Manga no fuka-yomi, otona-yomi*, pp. 359-361. Natsume’s problematic discussion the Japan-first origins of panels is found in “Characteristics of Japanese Manga,” soon to be published in English in *IJOCA* (forthcoming), and in our Translators’ Introduction there, we further contextualise Natsume’s later doubts about his essay’s Japan-centric manga stance.

7 [Translators’ Note] In the English translation (originally published in 1947 by the Guggenheim Foundation), it reads: ‘The one to the “left”—going outside—is movement into the distance...The one to the “right”—centered inwardly—is a movement toward home’ (emphasis in the original). Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, p. 121.

8 [Translator’s Note] Natsume next discusses alternative approaches to panel layout and panel functions in the succeeding essay (Chapter 11), ‘Panel Configurations of Shōjo Manga,’ the translation of which will soon be published in *U.S.-Japan’s Women’s Journal* (forthcoming).

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