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The Construction of Panels (Koma) in Manga: By Natsume Fusanosuke from Why Is Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression (Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono hyōgen to bunpō, 1997)

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The Construction of Panels (Koma) in Manga

By Natsume Fusanosuke from *Why Is Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression (Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono hyōgen to bunpō, 1997)*

Translated by Jon Holt and Teppei Fukuda

Translators' Introduction to "The Construction of Panels (*Koma*) in Manga"

"We are not alone!" ("Ui aa natto aroon!") was the shared response of Natsume Fusanosuke and his colleague Takekuma Kentarō when, as if visited by extraterrestrials, they encountered a kindred spirit in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (first published in Japanese as *Mangagaku* in 1998; retranslated in 2020).¹ Natsume and his fellow critics and scholars had published their own definitive study of how to understand comics in 1995: the now out-of-print co-authored *How to Read Manga (Manga no yomikata, Takarajima)*, for which Natsume made a considerable contribution. Like McCloud, Natsume trailblazed a long-lasting path about how to understand sequential panel flow, character design, and other interesting aspects crucially important to manga, such as hand-drawn onomatopoeia. In 1996, Natsume adapted his ideas for television in a twelve-episode educational series titled *Why Is Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression (Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono hyōgen to bunpō)*; the series was broadcast from July 4 through September 23 on NHK, the Japanese equivalent of PBS. For its *Human University (Ningen daigaku)* shows, NHK publishes print guides so readers can prepare for and later review each episode. Natsume's printed digest consisted of nearly 150 pages. Natsume later expanded his guide into a version that has had multiple printings since its publishing in 1997. The present translated

essay is the ninth chapter of Part One of *Why Is Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression*.

Natsume first explores how panels are constructed in manga, initially looking at the four-panel strip (*yon-koma manga*) and then he considers more dramatic uses of the panel in expanded, longer story manga. In subsequent chapters, he looks at more experimental story manga from the 1960s and then the layered, nearly anti-sequential layouts in the girls' (*shōjo*) manga developed from the 1970s by pioneering female artists.² Further, Natsume focuses on the basics of panel construction by understanding what innovative artists can do with the most basic *koma* flow, seen in the iterative (*hanpuku*) strips of master gag artist Igarashi Mikio. For such manga, Natsume uses the term “event” (*jiken*) to describe seemingly trivial developments in such panels. Far from being boring, these minimal comic strips for Natsume reveal a kind of artistic genius—or something particularly resonant for Japanese audiences—in these subdued and yet meaningful mini-stories that focus on small, perfect worlds. Other useful aspects of the essay include Natsume’s sharing of his own compositional process including idea development, thumbnails, and storyboarding; he also visits the highly creative and experimental work of Azuma Hideo, a figure truly under-researched in English-language comic studies, in order to explain how panels bolster a comic story and reinforce its temporal and spatial dimensions. This type panel configuration had not been discussed in Japan in the late 1990s, so Natsume was venturing again into new territory here.

Natsume took his earlier work in the co-authored *How to Read Manga* and used it as the basis of many of his essays in *Why Is Manga So Interesting*. Parts of the present essay can be seen in its 1995 precursor chapter “Unlocking the Fundamental Principles of the Panel” (pp. 168-183). Natsume greatly added and revised his ideas here with his focus on the four-panel strip, making the *Why*

Is Manga So Interesting version and our translation of it so valuable for scholars and students in Comics Studies. In his 1998 review of *Understanding Comics*, Natsume displayed an aversion and allergy to McCloud's narrative persona ("the character doesn't appeal to me [*kyara ga tatte inai*], as a Japanese reader"); however, he was greatly intrigued by McCloud's "six types of panel transitions" and McCloud's keen sensitivity to the differences in panel types found in Japan versus those in the West. Given the discrepancy in time between Natsume's work and McCloud's work being translated into Japanese, it is clear that these two theorists were initially unaware of each other's contributions. Despite their different approaches to comic-page analysis, Natsume praised McCloud for his insightfulness into manga panel constructions. In his review of the then-newly translated Japanese edition of *Understanding Comics*, Natsume wrote: "McCloud concludes that Japanese manga is different because [we] Japanese give considerable weight to the *ma* (INTERVALS)"³ in panel transitions, which indicates that he was impressed with McCloud's discovery of the "substantial presence" of aspect-to-aspect panels in manga.⁴ The present translation essay and its follow-up chapter ("The Functions of Panels")⁵ represent important early discussions of the formal properties of manga—the "medium of expression" movement in Manga Studies developed by Natsume and his colleagues in the 1990s.⁶

Since that time, Natsume has greatly widened his scope to consider larger forces in manga, including publisher-artist relationships, fan and reader responses, and the forces of criticism and the market.⁷ By 2006, looking back on his numerous volumes of manga studies, he has also acknowledged a rather "strong sense of the past" (*kakokan*) in his writing.⁸ Natsume was ever more conscious of this fact in light of new directions in manga criticism had taken in the early 2000s, specifically Itō Gō's postmodernist approach, *Tezuka Is Dead* (*Tezuka iz deddo*, 2005). Natsume wrote that he was undaunted by Itō and the new wave of scholars,

and, in fact, was stimulated so much by their efforts to review his work and try a new “trial and error approach” (*shikō-sakugo*) with new investigations that it resulted in his twin 2004 publications: the theoretical *Challenges for Manga Studies* (*Mangagaku e no chōsen*) and the companion application text *Deep Readings of Manga, Adult Readings of Manga* (*Manga no fukayomi, otona yomi*). Readers of the present chapter essay will understand, then, the origins of Natsume’s early analytical approach—a central 1990s text in manga studies—and how it served as a launching ground in the early phase of comics “expression theory” (*hyōgenron*). In 2006, he wrote of his excitement in *Manga Studies* becoming “more and more able to examine the various phenomena of manga, with more rigorous methods and more numerous points of view.”⁹ Certainly, in 2006, Natsume was embracing change. However, even back in 1997, as seen in the present translation, Natsume has always welcomed change and hoped for new developments in the field.

The translators would like to thank Natsume-sensei for his permission to translate and publish this essay. We also extend our thanks to the artists and publishers who permitted us to use their images.

[End of Translators’ Introduction]

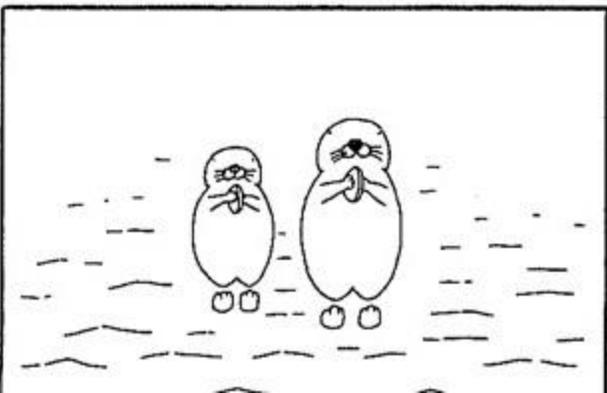
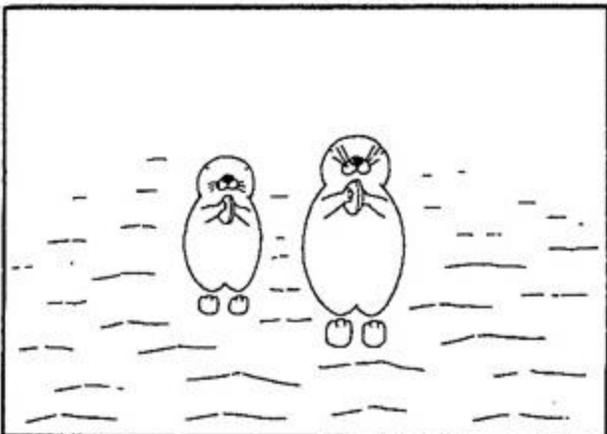
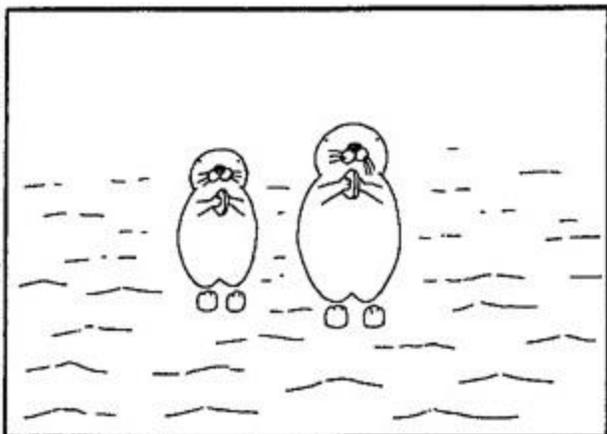
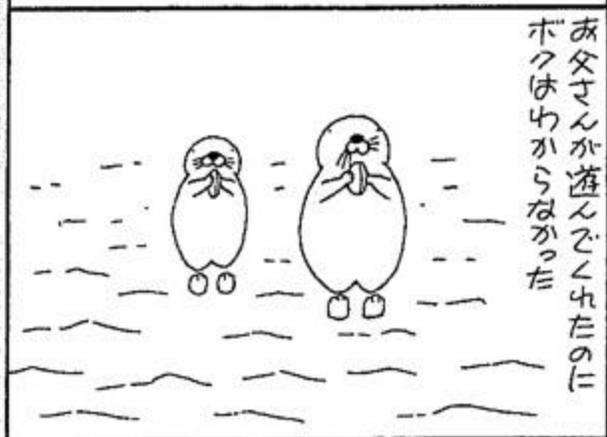
The Construction of Panels (*Koma*) in Manga

By Natsume Fusanosuke

The Charm of Restraint in *Bonobono*

Let's think about the panel (*koma*) in manga. In Figure 1, we see an early example from Igarashi Mikio's *Bonobono* comic strip, which began in 1986 and still runs today.¹⁰ *Bonobono* was a hit that opened up new ground for the four-panel strip. What makes it so interesting is the nuance of its panel flow.

お父さんが遊んでくれたのに



お父さんが遊んでくれた

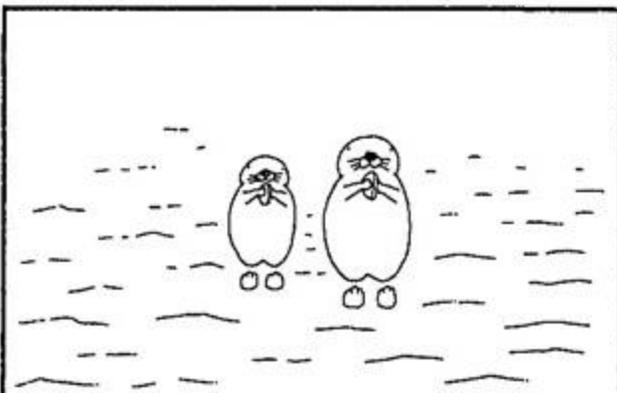
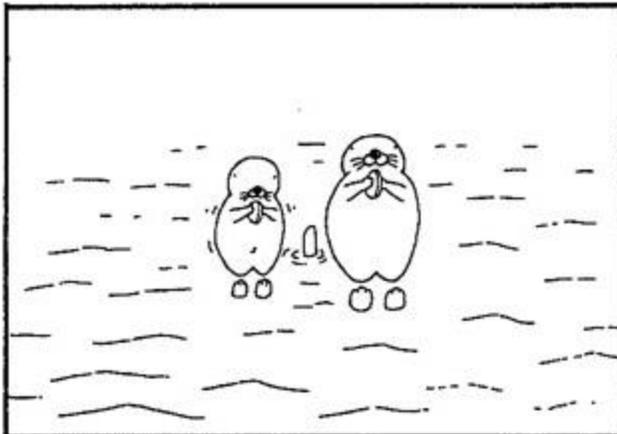
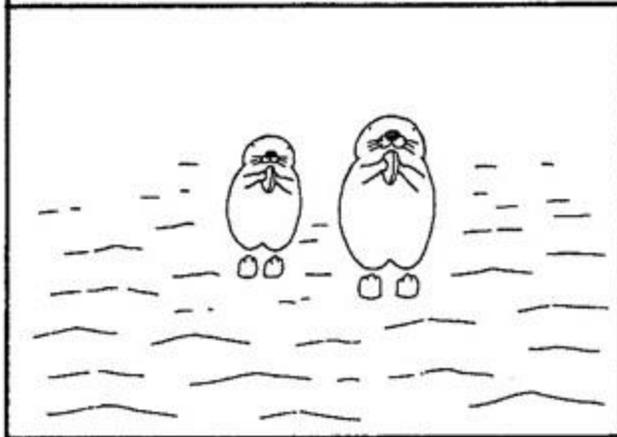


Figure 1. Four-panel manga where the artist depicts small, trivial events. Note: The first strip is on the right (“Dad Was Nice to Play with Me”; the second strip is on its left (“Dad Was Nice to Play with Me, But [I Didn’t Get It]”). (Igarashi Mikio, *Bonobono* [Manga Life/Manga Club, 1986~present]). Copyright Igarashi Mikio and Take shobo. In the right-hand strip we see the otter dad putting out his tail. His son Bonobono tries to catch it. That looks like the extent of the story, but you sense how cute and how heartwarming it is. When we then look at the left [second] strip, it is hard to understand just what is happening from a single glance. The comic seems to consist of just reiterations (*hanpuku*) of a single picture with Father and Son Otter simply floating in the water. We have the title that says “Dad Was Nice to Play with Me, But...” so we know that something happened. But what? The reader has to try to examine the whole thing carefully as if it were a quiz problem. If you give it another try, you see that the father is slightly raising and lowering his whiskers. It is just that Bonobono did not notice what Dad was doing. Maybe deep down there is a feeling of regret, or perhaps he felt guilty towards his father, but Bonobono’s expression does not change at all, so we do not know. And that is all there is.

Some people might feel it is funny; others might think it is boring. It depends on the person. Yet when we factor in how big of a hit *Bonobono* was, I think it is safe to say that the strip’s nuanced charm was felt by a large number of readers.

In order to be able to get what makes this comic so appealing, it is probably necessary to describe what should occur in any “event” (*jiken*) that must be present for a four-panel strip. The event has to be connected to something funny—it could be something about the dialogue or it could be something about the action.

The events in this particular work should be as minimal as possible. It is condensed so much that it might be a bit hard to get the joke at one glance. We normally do not even say this is an “event,” but that is the right word for the world of this series. The silent act of making one’s whiskers go up and down is something so subtle that even our protagonist does not know what happened.

In the world of *Bonobono* at the time, the artist completely cut out narration and dialogue so he could establish his four-panel story “events” with the most extreme form of compression. Since Ishii Hisaichi made his four-panel comics tell their stories with a massive amount of dialogue, it became very popular to pack four-panel manga frames full of words (Figure 2). Then, Igarashi, too, made his own departure from the popularity of that kind of four-panel comic (Figure 3). What Igarashi did was to take a risk by boldly deciding to entirely cut out words. That was what made *Bonobono* special. While doing that, Igarashi compressed—as much as was possible—the harmony of events and humor, those situational gaps and contextual punchlines that could really produce laughs, even though these elements are the staple of four-panel strips.



Figure 3. An early-period

four-panel manga from Igarashi Mikio. (“Dōse shinu nda!” [“We’re Gonna Die Anyway!”], 1982). Copyright Igarashi Mikio/Takeshobo. Readers immediately sensed that Igarashi’s work had to be read in a way unlike we did for four-panel manga up to that point. What his readers should enjoy is the smallness of Bonobono’s events. The calm world of Bonobono has minimal ups and downs. And in this world, small things can become big events. Such a world was completely new, completely different from the kind of four-strip manga existing at the time—and maybe from all manga at that time, too.

We see such a difference when we compare *Bonobono* to the usual manga that readers consume these days. Normally in story manga, we see things happening in large, dramatic ways,

but *Bonobono* appeals to readers with its calm utopian-like environments. Igarashi creates a place where small, little things happen that transcend our expectations. The gaps you see as you read from the right-hand comic and its left-hand companion strip in Figure 1 have events so nuanced that they seem not so much like impacting waves but tiny rivulets of water.

The reader goes on assuming that the world of *Bonobono* is one where gaps in these wavelets can become giant events. When he feels himself in a part of that flow, he realizes that little things like this happen and can make our protagonist *Bonobono* feel sorry deep down. That is how Igarashi connects these minor events to something so peculiarly funny. That is why at the very least we can say that early *Bonobono* strips are not the kind of comics that have you laughing out loud. Instead, you end up snickering in little waves of mirth.

Impressions from Manga and the Flow of Panels

The vital part of manga expression is that all of these expressions we investigated above are all done in the classic, four-panel strip. The artist uses this form, lining up four panels of equal width and height, so they are all the same size, but he can express very subtle differences. In some cases, a good four-panel strip can seem a lot like it is the same panel in a repetitive, iterative (*hanpuku*) flow where the panels all almost look the same. In Figure 1, time flows between each panel but it seems nearly imperceptible because there is only a faint beat (*ma*). The reader gets an amusing impression from *Bonobono*—not a splash but a ripple—and this only happens because of the close relationship the story has to the four-panel comic's form and its repetitive, repeating panel flow.

Even in these classic four-panel strips, you will find that the enjoyment of the comic is so closely connected to the form and structure of its panels.

Generally, these horizontal or rectangular panels are common panels you will see in your everyday reading experience. They convey a feeling of stability to the reader. In your average story manga when the artist lines up and continues the same panels in this way, they actually serve a special function. In dramatic constructions, the artist will vary the size of the panel sizes to show the ups and downs of the story and that is totally normal for such manga. So conversely, we can say that small, private worlds, like the case of *Bonobono*, cannot be created without the premise of postwar manga, which has far more dramatic shifts.

Panel Constructions within the Page

If we consider that the four-panel manga is like a traditional form of poetry, like haiku, which has a limitation in its syllable count, then your average story manga is like prose, like a short story or a novel. The “prose” elements in panel construction have way more variations in reciprocal connections between the positioning of the panels and the pictures than a four-panel comic. In a longer manga story, an artist might make one panel big or shut another down to a smaller size. How might the artist position the panels right to left and top to bottom? How might she situate them all within one page, or in some cases across a two-page spread (*mi-hiraki*)? What kind of effect will they have when her reader turns the page?

In manga with a high page count, the unique qualities of the artist’s layouts like this ends up becoming her own personal, biological sense of rhythm. In their work, what manga artists do is translate abstract ideas, themes, and story—things the eye cannot see—into something concrete. And the first thing they do is create a kind of series of memos where they break down the panels on each page. In the manga world, professionals call this “blocking” (*nēmu o kiru*).¹¹

This part of the work is a very important stage in manga expression. To make things understood in a concrete way, let me try to trace the steps in how one creates a manga story.

First, the artist will consider the order of the scenes and the dialogue, making a memo list of those ideas. Of course, some artists do this (Figure 4) and some do not. Either way, artists do this in their heads unconsciously. This stage is probably the same whether you are working on a novel or a film.

王様はマツメを食べて
 高しりマツメを食べて
 自分がマツメをこぼした
 ↓ 自分がマツメをこぼした
 王子は自分を責める。そして
 マツメの殻を食べて
 ↓ 裸 後悔した
 「あのマツメを食べて
 ↓ 後悔した
 高しりマツメを食べて
 ↓ 高しりマツメ? オ
 ↓ 後悔! オ
 ↓ 0.1?
 ↓ 後悔

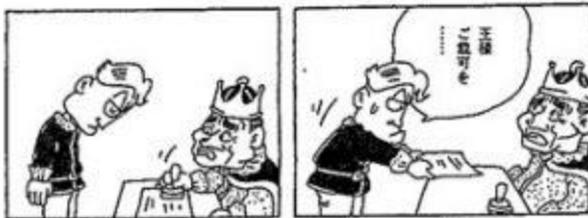


Figures 4 and 5. Writing down ideas (top) and making thumbnails (*nēmu-wari*) (bottom). (Natsume Fusanosuke, *Kenmei naru miso* [Oh Wise Miso], 1992-1996.) Copyright Natsume Fusanosuke.

Then you “cut” or block the scenes (in Japanese, these are called *names* [*nēmu*], see Figure 5). Our word *nēmu* refers to things like lines of dialogue (*serifu*). *Nēmu* are the places where the artist will break down the panels across all the pages, putting rough pictures and dialogue lines in them. It is at this point that you begin to sense at a glance that this is a rough draft of manga. Even for the comic creator, it is only through this process of doing the rough *nēmu* layouts that her ideas will take on the concrete form of the manga.

Thus, the general configuration of words and pictures will be decided by the size, by the vertical and horizontal positioning of the panels, etc. The flow of time now becomes visible with the artist’s pacing (*ma no okikata*). The overall potential of the manga, too, probably can be ascertained at this point.

After that, following one’s rough blocked-out designs, one will sketch out with a pencil the manuscript pages and separate out the panels on proper “draft sheets” (*genkō yōshi*) for manga (Figure 6). The artist brings out the action over the manuscript with a pen, so once he has erased his original pencil marks, he will have a complete page (Figure 7).



Figures 6 and 7. Using pencils to generate the manga manuscript (top) and making the finishes with pen over the pencils (bottom). (*Kenmei naru miso* [Oh Wise Miso], 1992-1996.) Copyright Natsume Fusanosuke. Now we have seen what it takes for a manga page to come together. The blocking and basic panel design is the very thing that makes those abstract ideas concrete. If we were talking about a basic four-panel cartoon, the panel layout is always going to be the same, so things will quickly move from the idea stage to the composition stage. However, in an advanced story manga (i.e., beyond a four-panel manga), if the artist does not think out the panel flow, his manga will not come together. I feel that a manga only takes on concrete expression when the artist reaches a stage where he can lay out the flow of the panels. Of course, in any group of artists, there will be those creative people that never make even a memo. They immediately start at the manuscript stage and quickly grab their pens to complete their pages, but even those artists have everything I just talked about all in their heads, so for them it works at the subconscious level.

What I can definitely say is that manga expression involves the mechanism of expressing things in the way you lay out your ideas—the content that consists of words and pictures—in forms, which is your arrangement of the panels. This is the most fundamental principle of what we call manga today. However, even if you have a manga without words, you can still have a manga. It is just that you cannot have a manga when it lacks either pictures or panels. In that sense, the bare minimum—the most essential elements—a manga must have are drawings and panels.

What Happens When the Panels Disappear?

Let me give you an interesting example (Figure 8) of a manga composition: Azuma Hideo's *Disappearing Ninja* (*Dororon ninja*, 1979-1980). Here we have an artist suddenly removing the manga panels. What happens to the story when he does this?

Figure 8. When the artist pulls out the panel frames, what happens? (Azuma Hideo, *Dororon ninja* [Disappearing Ninja], 1979-1980 Manga Gag). Copyright Azuma Hideo. Normally in manga, the characters proceed through each panel following a temporal order therein, so you are not going to have the character appear simultaneously again with himself. Things do not become confusing because a character will be drawn large or small depending on a distance established within each panel.

Demarcating each character with clear panels also helps in that sense. Yes, when there are no panels, you would end up with the same characters (both large and small) together on the same page, like what we have with Azuma's crazy page here. You even have in the lower right corner both a large version and a small version of the character equally appearing and saying something like, "What the heck?"

On Azuma's page, within each zone you have certain sections of dialogue the characters say, but they all tell us something about the function of panels. For example, at one point a character says, "I wonder how we're supposed to move forward?" That alone sustains the illusion of space the panel normally maintains for the characters and the background, so we at least can sense that maybe the characters are walking from the right side to the left perhaps through their town, or, we think maybe they are moving from the background space out toward us. My point is: when you lose the panel, you lose your sense of direction in the comic.

When the manga cannot sustain both a temporal order and a spatial order, it is natural that our characters here comment on such things like, "Isn't it inconvenient? It's also hard to read." Conversely, we can say that panels support a reader by aligning her line of sight in both temporal and spatial ways, carrying things forward in an orderly way.

"I don't even know how far the artist should go in drawing the background," our characters say, pointing out the way that a panel

frame will shore up and limit the picture, effectively stabilizing a sense of distance to which the reader can fix his gaze. Likewise, they say, “When it comes to close-up moments, the whole body has to appear.” As the characters say that, one notices that, normally, a character can be drawn with only the upper part of the body contained in the panel as the reader’s view of the character grows closer so the artist can express that character in close-up. But because you have no panel enclosure, the full body has to be drawn. It is only because you have panels neatly establishing difference that you can go from small versions of the characters appearing in the distance and switch to large versions of them in close up.

Leading the Eye through Panel Composition

The essential temporal and spatial flow that survives even in this example is the page of magazines and books itself: a page becomes a panel frame. Even here, the artist composed the page so it would bring about, somehow, a desired ordered reading of the word balloons and dialogue. Then he purposefully put the large characters on the bottom left to make readers turn the page to make the page work as a piece of entertainment (Figure 9). Yes, the eye is guided through this entire page. This is the normal function the panel structure possesses.

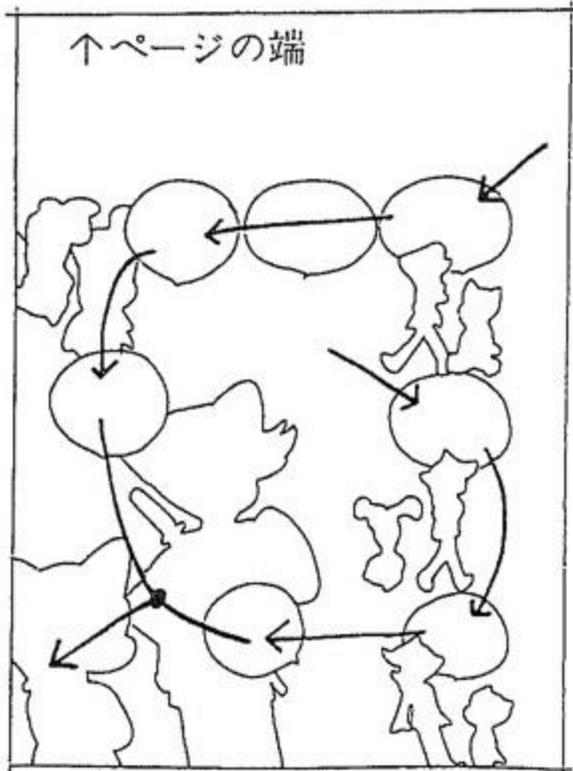


Figure 9. The order of the

reader's line of sight.

This way of getting people to turn the page, for us, might be so ingrained and natural, but it is actually determined in the material sense by the nature of the form of the book itself. In newspaper comics, there is no need to make people turn the page to read more, but in today's manga, it is a central premise that you make a page that gets your readers to turn it. So, an artist will arrange the panels, thinking about how to best achieve this effect; it is totally natural to have artists who keep making stories with ups and downs, moving the reader along. For example, when the reader gets to the end of a page, he is made to expect, "I wonder what will happen next?" and the artist and his page make the reader flip the page and then they give him a surprising development.

Artists work in this mode today, calculating how to pull this off in terms of expressing their own panel flow. Now we have reached a point where each manga story has such a high count of physical pages and where manga as an art form has developed so artists

can tell longer stories. In Japan, after the war, manga stories suddenly and sharply increased their page count and it is normal now to have exceptionally well-calculated stories. Once the manga industry gave us the formats we now commonly enjoy—the weeklies, the monthlies, and the trade paperbacks—the medium of manga has fully matured, enabling us to have truly sophisticated compositional methods and techniques today.

Whatever the case, the exceptionally high development that we see in manga expression today can only be explained if you understand the functions of the manga panel and the page. It is natural that panel analysis would become for manga a very important topic. Even so, it is true that up to this point [in the late 1990s], there has been hardly any discussion of panel configurations in contemporary manga criticism, so it is safe to say that those of us in this field are standing on a new frontier.

Notes

[1] Natsume, *Fūun manga retsuden*, p. 227.

[2] Our new translations of these chapters can be found, respectively, in the newest and forthcoming issues of *The International Journal of Comic Art (IJOCA)* and *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal (USJWJ)*.

[3] Capitalization and English in the original Japanese. Natsume, *Fūun manga retsuden*, p. 227. The original Japanese translation of *Understanding Comics* was published under the translation direction of Otaku-ologist Okada Toshio (Bijutsu Shuppansha); Odagiri Hiroshi and Shiina Yukari published their newly translated version published in 2020 (Fukkan Dotto Komu).

[4] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 78.

[5] Our translation of this chapter can be found in the forthcoming (2021) issue of *The Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* (EJCJS).

[6] For a robust discussion of the context of this essay in that 1990s Manga Criticism movement, see Jaqueline Berndt, “Considering Manga Discourse: Location, Ambiguity, Historicity,” pp. 295-310.

[7] For the author’s self-critical retrospective on the origins of his manga theory, see his “Conclusion” (“Owari ni”) in Natsume, *Mangagaku e no chosen*, pp. 221-224.

[8] Natsume, *Manga no fukayomi, otona yomi*, p. 370.

[9] Natsume, *Manga no fukayomi, otona yomi*, p. 371.

[10] [Translators’ Note] Igarashi’s *Bonobono* continues even in the 21st century. A most recent trade paperback collection of the 2020 strips were published in the forty-fifth volume of the series in March 2020 by Takeshobo.

[11] [Translators’ note] In Japanese “nēmu” could correspond to the English comics industry terms of thumbnails, storyboarding, breakdowns, although as one can see from Natsume’s personal example (Figure 4), a more appropriate translation is “blocking.” The next step, *nēmu-wari* is when an artist creates thumbnail versions, breaking down the story parts into panels with the script inside. (See *Manga no yomikata* for an alternative example). Masami Toku provides a helpful gloss: “a kind of storyboard but also a word for the stage in the development of each manga. It is a brief sketch of koma-wari (frame layout), composition in each frame, words, and the layout of characters” (Toku, *International Perspectives on Shojo and Shojo Manga*, p. 241). For a British artist’s approach to this process, see Gibbons and Pilcher, *How Comics Work*, pp. 61-64. For the approach of

American artist, of course Will Eisner was one of the first to share his steps and terms (the “dummy”) for this process in *Comics & Sequential Art (Expanded Edition)*, pp. 122-136.

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