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Probing the *Manga ToPoEt(h)ics* in Tezuka's *Message to Adolf*

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Manga and Spatial Turn

The postmodern era has seen both global fragmentation and unification occurring simultaneously, resulting in multiple notions of space and theoretical frameworks. Through not only cultural and critical geography, but also literary geography and cartography, a new understanding of spatiality has emerged. With the so-called spatial turn, established theoretical perspectives concerning the time-space continuum are being re-evaluated, and the complex issue of topography is regaining relevance. The representation of space in literary works brings into focus multiple opportunities to develop new, decolonizing and non-normative spatial imageries. Instead of the previously dominating historicism, the spatial turn as an interdisciplinary perspective allows one to deconstruct and reconstruct categories of space and place while overcoming previously established spatial dichotomies such as East/West, far/near, periphery/center. The observations of prominent thinkers such as Michel Foucault (1997) contributed to an understanding of space as something other than a fixed category. Conceptual “de-territorialization” and “re-territorialization” has affected issues of identity and borders, including the epistemological basis of area studies.

Engagement in area studies, as a form of spatial scholarship, has traditionally been focused on national, regional and local characteristics, but it has also become apparent that it involves complex transrelational aspects: between the space of the subject matter and the place of its critical exploration. Globalized political, cultural and economic entanglements are also reflected in area studies, as boundaries that once seemed separate and solid can now be traversed. The Japan craze which has globally spread, mainly due to the popular visual forms of manga and anime, can be understood as one example in that regard. Over the last two decades, the transnational aspect of their popularity has been widely re-

cognized among scholars both in Japan and abroad. Some fans are certainly pursuing education within area studies, and university curriculums are changing. Manga studies offers a great variety of approaches and methodologies; its quantity and diversity enables numerous perspectives stretching from narratology and visual language to audience and reception. However, posing the provocative question of whether manga is beyond critique, Japanese culture and manga specialist Jaqueline Berndt foregrounds crucial aspects that notably differ inside and outside of Japan. According to Berndt, both production and consumption of manga narratives in Japan do not “necessitate critical endeavors” (Berndt, 2016, 168), whereas English-language comics studies is heavily inclined towards criticism based on literary theory. Furthermore, manga’s sheer quantity and immense diversity have consequences for socio-political critique and public (as society-wide) debate. Efforts of Japanese studies scholars to illuminate the socio-historical background of manga production or to privilege contextual analysis may paradoxically lead to reducing the possibilities of manga interpretation. Challenging the very notion of manga critique, Berndt suggests that:

[...] instead of playing off contexts against texts, society against aesthetics, political (intellectual) reason against affective (fannish) investment, as has happened so often in the name of critique by both advocates and adversaries of manga entertainment, it is high time to acknowledge the interrelatedness of these alleged counterparts. (Ibid., 174)

This quote approximates cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove’s standpoint that the spatial turn implies a disbelief in both universal exegesis and “single-voiced historical narratives,” while acknowledging that “position and context are centrally and inescapably implicated in all constructions of knowledge” (Cosgrove, 1999, 7). Berndt blurs the lines between normative dichotomies of manga interpretation and situates manga reading as an amalgamation of “opposite” correlatives. In the light of Cosgrove’s argument, it is reasonable to conclude that viable manga comprehension emerges from the position of what Berndt distinguishes as omnipresent “interrelatedness.”

Another important aspect in manga studies has been recently addressed by cultural studies scholar Zoltan Kacsuk. Probing the issue of “what manga is,” he explores key dichotomies in manga studies discourse, first, from the perspective of style, and second, through the “Made in Japan” paradigm. Kacsuk argues that if understood formally, namely, as “style,”

manga transcends national boundaries and systems of production or dissemination (Kacsuk, 2018, 2), while the second position insists on a topographic instance of origin and locates manga exclusively in the Japanese cultural context, emphasizing the spatiality of either manga reception or production.

Having stressed these complexities of critically reading manga studies, I would further like to draw attention to the issue of positioning. To position oneself seems to be not only the distinguishing trait of the human condition, but also an inevitable task always set before us in the humanities. The expectations of others, as well as various sets of rules and instructions posed to abide, unavoidably determine our posture even when we choose to diverge from them. One's body of work never appears to be liberated from "legitimate" questions of orientation. So, what is one's orientation when considering the Orient? Feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed explores this issue in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) stressing the significance of orientation as a state in which the bodies are being turned or directed toward and around objects. While manga studies often employs a queer or feminist approach and is concerned with questions of gender, sexuality or race which are central to Ahmed's work, I would like to foreground another aspect that she suggests: Ahmed invites us to re-evaluate the "phenomenality of space" (i.e., its intimate bodily inhabitation), proposing the notion of "migrant bodies" for bodies that are dislocated from their place of origin. This migrant orientation presumes a double point of view, directed toward both a home that has been lost and a location that has yet to become one. This applies not only to migration in the sociological sense.

After all, we are always leaving home and searching for a new one when reading manga, and more generally, when conducting research. The body of knowledge which one had previously acquired morphs with new findings that the subject of inspection itself imposes on us. In line with Ahmed's idea that "perception [...] involves orientation, what is perceived depends on where we are located" (Ahmed, 2006, 27), we should acknowledge that we, or at least some of us, are "out of place" when engaging in manga interpretation.

To be more precise, Western critical thought is still dominant in the realm of global culture. Even when employing Foucault's power/ knowledge notion or Edward Said's critique of Orientalism as Eurocentrism, Western discourses still prove to be well established, central and dominant, supposing the West to be the initiator of research on non-Western cultures. Regardless of the variety of perspectives and approaches, the

very position from which the body of knowledge is produced cannot be ignored. My own topography, the Balkans, is also marked and defined by an Orientalist paradigm, despite being set within European borders. No matter how “close,” the Western-European discourse continues to proclaim the Balkans as a wild, barbarian place, almost like an alien organism in their own belly (see Todorova, 2009).

Japan, on the other hand, is constantly being perceived as an exotic place, whether by the fascinated West or through domestic discourses that advocate uniqueness (so-called *nihonjinron*). Thus, it appears challenging to entangle in a kind of dual otherness, that is to say, to approach the “incomprehensible” Japan from the alleged “off position” of the dissociated Balkans. What direction does one take when one has to appropriate the orientations of those who have already established their own? How can the Other touch another Other? Is it possible, or should we neglect those imposed discourses at all? In view of the above-mentioned argument that position is crucial for both construction and deconstruction of knowledge, I would like to propose the notion of *topoet(h)ics* in relation to the idea of manga hybridity. Considering the potential of manga directionality, in the broadest sense of narrative, genre, style, visual representation, production and reception, while acknowledging that there is no single, obvious or fixed meaning of what manga is, the term *topoet(h)ics* encompasses three main aspects: topography, poetics, and ethics.

In the Realm of Manga: Topography, Poetics and Ethics

ToPoEt(h)ics as a triadic concept for manga studies shall be first clarified by untangling its three constituents. Manga topography refers to the positions of the author, the audience and the characters within the narrative. It does not make us choose between mutually exclusive options such as “statelessness” (*mukokuseki*) or Japaneseness, historical facts or fiction, audience perceived as community or nation, or to give prominence to either the narrative or visual domain. In fact, as a kaleidoscopic methodological device, it allows choices that do not necessarily contradict one’s positioning by foregrounding the topological instances of manga, both as narrative space within manga, and as its space of narration (Japanese origination), and also as the spaces of reception and mediatization (domestic and international). Tezuka Osamu’s *Message to Adolf* (1983-85) provides an excellent example to introduce the concept of *topoet(h)ics* and its potential to transcend the above-mentioned limitations of both area and comics studies.

The narrative space of *Message to Adolf*, which is mainly related to events emerging in the wake of World War II, moves back and forth between Germany, Japan and Israel. Investigating the theme of identity, Tezuka features three central characters who share the same name, Adolf. The first Adolf's (i.e., Hitler's) political desire to rule and materialize his vision of the world in reality affects the lives of two close friends in Japan, Adolf Kaufmann, son of a German diplomat and a Japanese mother, and Adolf Kamil, son of a Jewish baker. Their lives are affected by secret documents which contain information on Hitler's ancestry. On a narrative level, the manga reflects on national interconnectedness through the personal struggle of the characters.

Reconsidering Tezuka's transnational historical adventure through the lens of topoet(h)ics may offer a new understanding of international relationships in three regards: narrative time frame, production years, and present-day reception. The space of narration of *Message to Adolf* is evidently Japan, and this aspect gives prominence to the country of the manga's origin, placing it in historical context. It involves both the temporal and the spatial environment of its creation and first publication from early 1983 to mid-1985, that is, during the final decade of Tezuka's career. Natsu Onoda Power, author of a Tezuka monograph, notes that at this point in his life, he "became more socially and historically conscious" (Onoda, 2009, 150) dealing with subjects like the Holocaust (in *Message to Adolf*), but also the Meiji Restoration (in *Hidamari no ki*), or biotechnology (in *Neo-Faust*). This enhanced thematic awareness could be understood as a reaction to Japan's economic success in that era, a warning not to forget the risks and uncertainties of being in power.

Considering the third instance of manga topography which relates to the space of reception and mediatization, I would like to give an example which is of specific interest for Serbian readers. Practically a footnote in the *Message to Adolf* narrative, Tezuka features the controversial historical figure of Branko Vukelić, a Yugoslav working for Stalin's spy in Imperial Tokyo, Richard Sorge. Together they obtained the information about operation Barbarossa and the fact that the Japanese military would not attack the Soviet Union which allowed for the strategic transfer of the Russian forces to the Western front to fight against Nazi Germany. Vukelić was imprisoned by the Japanese and sentenced to life imprisonment. He died shortly after the sentencing in 1945, but was posthumously awarded the Order of Patriotic War by the Soviet Red Army in 1964. This historical fact holds the potential to trigger diverse and nuanced interpretation among ex-Yugoslavian readers; those living in Japan as well

as those not directly involved. Tezuka's merging of fact and fiction suggests that one should be aware of both the fictionality of historical events and the reality of imaginary spaces. The coexistence of these realms reveals the rather ambiguous nature of the world we live in, and as such compels us to migrate from one space to another, feeling familiar and displaced at the same time.

Japanese studies and social science researcher Emilio-José Delgado-Algarra reflects the socio-historical commitment in Tezuka's work and particularly the educational potential of *Message to Adolf* as a manga which was not produced as an educational tool (*gakushū manga*). His discussion leads us to another part of the concept topoet(h)ics, namely that which relates to the ethical questions raised within narratives or provoked by a certain content. In Tezuka's work, Delgado-Algarra recognizes a significant potential for broadening students' understanding of concepts such as conscience or responsibility for one's actions (Delgado-Algarra, 2017, 852). Often characters are in a position in which their devotion is put to the test, being torn between the sense of belonging to one's nation or family, friend or love interest. Regardless of ideological stance – whether promoting the Nazi regime or vehemently resisting it, eventually, Tezuka's characters are equally turned into murderers. All moral principles are ostensibly nullified when they tragically experience bringing death to a family member or a person with whom they have a friendly relationship. In *The Sense of the World*, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy proposes the same viewpoint, arguing that ontological responsibility precedes any moral responsibility in a concrete situation. The logic behind his argument is based on reasoning that responsibility is an integral part of being, which always involves the other, as *being-in-common*. Responsibility resides within ourselves and within the shared space between beings. This “invisible” space of responsibility emerges when readers are confronted with the ordeals of Tezuka's characters.

Furthermore, the central issue of *Message to Adolf* calls into question the ideological belief in nationality in terms of sharing the same blood. While criticizing the racist discourse of Japan's past, Tezuka creates an opportunity for non-Japanese readers to possibly reflect on their own nation's (historical) wrongdoings. Highlighting the racism which the white Adolf Kamil experiences in past Japan,¹ Tezuka provides to the

¹ “Miss Ogi, why can't I be general? Because I'm white? Because I have blue eyes?... I was born in Japan, teacher. I go to a Japanese school, and I have the same teachers they do, why do they discriminate against me?” (Tezuka, 2012a, 149).

non-Japanese audience the perspective of being a victim of such prejudice, instead of enforcing it. This brings us to a sublayer of the concept of topoet(h)ics, that is, topological ethics, which marks the variety of connotations regarding specific ideological constructs within a certain territory. In the same manner, we could engage in the poetics of topography, unveiling the author's unique vision of a fictionally generated world. Manga poetics requires an exploration of the formal standards and integral features of comics, while acknowledging the author's contribution to new models of narrative construction. With a plot reflecting issues of personal and collective identity, accompanied by a multinational cast of characters and a variety of topoi, Tezuka's poetic stance approximates manga's global readership.

In a broader sense, topoet(h)ics could be a contribution to the spatial-turn perspective on manga studies. To engage in topoet(h)ics is to think of new horizons, spaces and trajectories of expression which reflect both our particularities and commonalities. Manga's escaping of a precise definition suggests the need of a certain bricolage with respect to terminology, methodological apparatus, and interpretation. This could possibly help to acknowledge all the differences in positionality, while insisting on infinite combinations of interpretative entanglements that may liberate manga from the academic demand of rigorous and definitive placement. To borrow Ahmed's terminology again, our "migrant bodies," enforcing the tactics of topoet(h)ics, bear the potential to detach us from the identity of one place, and to link us to the multi-spatialities of the manga realm. A topoet(h)ical reading of manga suggests the transversing of established formations of "here" and "there," and supports the recognition of distant and disparate contexts.

Considering the external space, Foucault argues that "we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (Foucault, 1997, 331). This claim equally resonates with the variety of manga positionalities, the diverse contexts that colonize its narrative, aesthetics, genres, styles and receptions. Instead of choosing between *watching* and *reading* manga, or restricting oneself to a "one-dimensional" territory of interpretation, we have the possibility to *reground* in new concepts that allow for more freedom and fluidity.

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