Between West and East: Japanese Mangas as World Literature

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Abstract
The following essay proposes intertextuality in Japanese mangas as a bridge between Europe and Asia, it proposes the relationship betwixt texts as an overpass between dichotomies and socio-political space borders. In this sense and in virtue of focusing on interculturality and displaying a state of the matter as broad as possible, the following work seeks to part ways from the prevailing Eurocentrism in the academic field and to mention, both bibliographic sources and works and text fragments, from various countries and languages and cultivated by different authors (male and female). Hence, the intention of *Between West and East: Japanese mangas as World Literature* will be to show different examples of intertextuality present in mangas, recognizing this literary device as both a literary strategy and a path towards the understanding between cultures.

Keywords: World Literature, Intertextuality, Manga, Eurocentrism, Interculturality

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Introduction: the age of globalization

In the era of cultural dialogue, the academic field has to bet on an intercultural canon that reflects social heterogeneity and, among others, helps us manage diversity both in and outside Academia. As researchers, we have to approach to a re-thinking of the canon that reimagines the established hegemonic structures and avoids the predominant Eurocentrism. Additionally, regarding the educational system, professors have to bet on an intercultural corpus that prepares students for social diversity and the socio-historical context in which they will be framed. In this sense, the following paper defends that literature, especially, World Literature, can be a way towards interculturality. Thus, next, I will suggest a reconsideration of the notion of World Literature and propose *mangas* (Japanese comics) as a way to decanonize the canon and approach to a re-thinking of the prevalent Eurocentrism in the Academia, understanding *mangas'* intertextual nature as a potential bridge between cultures.

"World" literature?

World Literature, as a literature that transcends space-cultural borders and contributes to the creation of a heritage and collective imagination shared by the inhabitants of the globe, is an ideal tool to counter contradictions and foster understanding between cultures. Or, at least, it should. However, does this image of World Literature as a literature that transcends borders and cultures and whose definition and delimitations are shared by all human beings really exist? That is to say, is World Literature really "universal"?

In his *magnum opus The Western Canon* (1994), Harold Bloom argued that current reality cannot be understood without the set of books that shape the literary canon. The American critic proposed a solid literary canon made up almost exclusively of male, white, Western and Anglophone authors, a catalog in which -based on a culture of elites- predominant Eurocentric aesthetics prevailed over the claim of, among others, non-hegemonic objects or minority cultures. As an object of power that functions as a reflection of the political ideas of our reality, the literary canon is, in truth, a tool that tries to universalize the particular, a discourse in which the literatures called alternatives or peripheral (thus establishing the canon as the center) have no place in it and which will be in charge of building and promoting the notion of World Literature (WL) that prevails today.

While several academics (Bhabha, 1994; Casanova, 2001; Henitiuk, 2012) wonder about how to restrict the meaning of a concept that "is still in the process of emerging" (Puchner, 2011: 256), and if it is possible to do so without falling into essentialization (Watroba, 2017), the canon faces a corpus that, far from reflecting the diversity of the world, remains completely Eurocentric. Namely, the main problem with WL is not that we do not know what "World Literature" actually is, if, for example, it means "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch, & Spivak, 2003: 4), or quite the opposite: "world literature in the narrow sense of literature that circulates globally is historically complicit with the epistemic violence of imperialism" (Cheah, 2016: 18). The main problem with WL is that the only "universal" or "global" pieces that appear in academic books are Western ones, leaving out other important works from other cultures out of the canon.

To sum up, when Harold Bloom proposed his canon, he proposed a solid literary canon made up almost exclusively of Western authors. Why? Because the literary canon is not a non-political narrative but a tool that acts as a reflection of society. It can be described as a

discourse in which the Non-Western books have no place in, which is especially problematic because the canon is in charge of building and promoting the notion of World Literature that prevails nowadays. In other words, if the canon is Eurocentric, World Literature, despite its name, is also Eurocentric. That is why, the present paper is going to analyze a non-western genre: the *manga*.

Intertextuality in *mangas*

Comics have been defended by various authors as an effective instrument when it comes to: promoting visual literacy (Gillenwater, 2009; Del Mar, 2016), cultivating different disciplines: L2 language learning, mathematics, History... (Misrache et al., 2002; Toh, 2009; Caro, 2015; Serrano, 2019), developing students' critical thinking (Naghshineh et al., 2008; Segovia, 2012; Rovira-Collado, & Ortiz, 2015; Derbel, 2019; Ibarra, & Ballester, 2020) … Still, what I'm most interested in when analyzing *mangas* and their contribution to World Literature is their capacity to establish intertextual references, understanding "intertextuality" as the dialogue between pieces (Kristeva, 1966). Therefore, next, I will first point out some intertextual references in the industry that I found interesting and then argue why I believe that the intertextuality in *mangas* (which can be understood as Japanese comics) can be good to renew the literary canon.

First, *Dragon Ball.* Known as the manga that shaped the *manga* industry as we know it today, Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball* (1984-1995) has influenced countless series and has been adapted into numerous other forms of media. Still, and even though it is true that the story of Son Goku and the Dragon Balls has become one of the most influential series of all time, it must be highlighted that the *manga* itself was influenced by other pieces too, for instance, *Journey to the West* (1592).

From the very first chapter, one of the most famous *manga* series in History has a lot of references to one of the most famous Chinese books in History. For example, we can find several intertextual allusions in the construction of the protagonist himself, Son Goku. Goku is based on Sun Wukong, the protagonist of *Journey to the West*. Among others, his own name is a reference to the character of *Journey to the West*, as "Son Goku" is how the name of "Sun Wukong" is pronounced in Japanese. Additionally, Sun Wukong is known as the "monkey king", which is the reason why Goku has a monkey tale and can transform himself into a giant ape. Furthermore, Sun Wukong has a staff that can stretch to any length, and a cloud that he uses to fly through the sky, and that is why Goku has a magic stick that can stretch a lot and a cloud named the Flying Nimbus.

As we can see, *Dragon Ball* has a lot of allusions to *Journey to the West*. Still, it isn't the only *manga* that uses intertextuality as a tool to develop their stories. Among others, *Magi: The Labyrinth of Magic* (2009-2017) establishes several references to the well-known *One Thousand and One Nights*. Shinobu Ohtaka's story follows the adventures of Aladdin, Alibaba Saluja, and Morgiana, as they explore a mystical world full of mysterious dungeons and Djinns. The series is set in a world similar to the Middle East during the Middle Ages, with several of its regions and peoples based on real-world counterparts.

Still, it must also be pointed out that *mangas* don't have to establish connections with just one book. That is to say, for example, Sui Ishida's *Tokyo Ghoul* (2011-2014) is a story that follows an undergraduate student as he struggles to adapt to his new life as a half-ghoul half-human, and has both direct and indirect references to several literary masterpieces, such as

Herman Hesse's *Demian* (1919), Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun* (1947) or Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) from the very first chapter. Moreover, the majority of characters of Kafka Asagiri's *Bungō Stray Dogs* (2012-) allude to famous literary protagonists and authors like Agatha Christie, Ranpo Edogawa or Akiko Yosano.

Other times, *mangas* don't seek to establish direct intertextual references to literary masterpieces, but rather tend to focus on developing more general literary topics. For instance, based on the world of alchemy, Hiromu Arakawa's *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2001-2010) develops several topics such as resurrection, the Philosopher's stone, homunculus … This technique or tool is also used by Yasuhisa Hara, the author of the celebrated *manga* series *Kingdom* (2006-). Hara seeks to cultivate, on the one hand, a fictionalized version of the Warring States period of China, and, on the other hand, topics like the one mentioned on chapter 660. On chapter 660, Hara wonders about whether humans are good or bad, a discussion attributed to Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the West.

Sometimes, the references can be found, not in the original *mangas*, but rather in their adapted versions. In other words, some *mangas*' adaptations tend to establish literary references that were not found in the original *mangas*. For instance, in Hajime Isayama's *Attack on titan* (2009-2021), both versions (anime and *manga*) allude to Greek and Nordic mythologies by introducing scenes which hint at Atlas', Yggdrasil's, Atreus and Thyestes', … myths. Still, in its anime version, in the second minute of the second chapter, the viewer can appreciate two direct quotes to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*'s (1321) *Purgatory*, two sentences that, however, do not appear in the original *manga*. In this sense, it is important to note that intertextuality can also be related to interdisciplinarity.

One *manga* that focuses on the dialogue between disciplines is Tatsuki Fujimoto's *Chainsaw Man* (2018-). Based on the live of a teenager that seeks to keep surviving in a world full of demons (and eventually becomes a human-demon hybrid), *Chainsaw Man* develops literary topics such as the one about ignorance vs knowledge, still, it also establishes references with several disciplines. For example, on chapter 63, the reader faces a severed hand full of ants, a reference to Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929), and in the last panel of the chapter 95, Fujimoto draws the protagonist and the antagonist in a way that it reminds of Michelangelo's *La Pietà* (1499), furthering the transdisciplinary connection between *mangas* and other mediums.

This is something that is also deepen in *Chainsaw Man*'s anime adaptation. The opening song of the animated version of the series refers to different cultural products, such as movies like Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), or paintings like Gustave Doré's *Paradise Lost* (1866). Doré's painting can also be found in the *manga*, on chapter 81, and that's because *mangas* are also an appropriate medium to establish.

interdisciplinary references with paintings. A great example of this is yet another Japanese work: the *manga* of *Blue Period* (2017-). From its own very title (which is a reference to a Picasso's monochromatic period), Tsubasa Yamaguchi's *Blue Period* establishes numerous relations with several famous paintings, such as Tsuguharu Foujita's *Self-Portrait* (1929) on chapter 2, Evelyn De Morgan's *Clytie* (1887) on chapter 33, or Diego Velázquez's *The Three Musicians* (1618) on chapter 35.

With all of this in mind, one might wonder why are all these intertextualities (transdisciplinary or not) so interesting for the notion of World Literature. First, it must be

pointed out of their intercultural nature. To wit, what's so fascinating with the intertextuality in *mangas* is the fact that these dialogues between texts or disciplines are able to connect the East with the West. *Mangas* are a Japanese genre, a non-western object, but, at the same time, thanks to their intertextualities, they are able to connect different literatures and countries, including those Western and Eastern.

In this sense, another convenient thing about intertextuality in *mangas* is that it can help avoiding cultural shock. That is to say, as pointed by authors such as Fredric Jameson, Hans-Robert Jauss or Hans-Georg Gadamer, if the reader's knowledge and the knowledge required by the book do not coincide, the dialogue between the receiver, the work and the artist will be abruptly interrupted and the reader will reject the text. Therefore, regarding the present paper, if, as westerns, we are not used to read, for instance, books from determined cultures, once we start consuming them, we might reject them, as our knowledge might not match with the one required by the book. That's why intertextuality is so important. When referring to the Western reality, *mangas* give a familiar context to the reader and therefore are able to unite the East and the West.

Conclusions

In the era of globalization, the literary canon keeps being Eurocentric; World Literature, despite its name, it's still Western-like. Hence, the present essay has defended that the *manga*, as a Japanese genre, has a potential to renew the corpus and the canon. The intertextual references present in *mangas* can be a way to connect different bodies, spaces and times, uniting the East with the West and approaching to a real understanding of what World Literature means.

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