

Mutual  
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LAYERS OF AESTHETICS AND ETHICS IN  
JAPANESE POP CULTURE

MUTUAL IMAGES  
ISSUE 7 – AUTUMN 2019

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

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LAYERS OF AESTHETICS AND ETHICS IN  
JAPANESE POP CULTURE

EDITED BY  
MARCO PELLITTERI

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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# Editorial – Layers of aesthetics and ethics in Japanese pop culture

Marco PELLITTERI | Shanghai International Studies University, China

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**D**ear readers, students, fellow scholars,  
welcome to this seventh instalment of *Mutual Images*.

## Contents of this issue, at a glance

This issue is not as thick as all the previous ones and as the next will be; it compensates its brevity, however, with a novelty which I describe a few lines below. In its conciseness, *M.I.* 7 contains one very interesting article, a book review, an exhibition review, and in fact, a new, special section which I will discuss in the next segment of this Editorial. We will resume the publication of bigger instalments from *M.I.* 8, upcoming in June 2020.

The article we publish in this issue is “*Gaijin Mangaka: The Boundary-Violating Impulse of Japanised ‘Art-Comics’*”, by Portuguese researcher Ana Matilde de Sousa. I will briefly comment on this nice piece of scholarship in the section after the next.

As alluded to above, *Mutual Images* 7 inaugurates a new section, titled Research Files. This requires a specific introduction and it is therefore explained just below.

## Research Files<sup>1</sup>

*Mutual Images* is a journal whose Editorial Board has, since the establishment of our research association and of this publication, always had in mind the idea that academic scholarship and journals could/should be the venue, to a certain degree, of new solutions for the presentation of original research. This is why, among the possibly innovative ways to publish research data and materials—alongside the more established formats of the research paper, the academic article, and the critical review—we have been thinking for months about the modality we inaugurate here: the Research Files. This format basically

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<sup>1</sup> This segment of the Editorial is also repeated, in a much shorter version, as the introductory text of the Research Files at p. 29. Those who have already read it there or who are reading it here for the first time are advised.

consists of the presentation of research materials which, even though carefully revised, peer-reviewed, and edited for publication, nevertheless constitute batches of qualitative data which have either never been published in any other form, or which have been published only in part, or which have been anyway assessed as worthy of publication as useful materials for other scholars, researchers, and students in the academy community.

The idea came to us from two directions and situations. From one side, because we felt the thrill to propose a practical, straight-forward way to make interesting materials available; from another side, because we wanted to launch a signal to fellow scholars at any stage of their careers, from professors to graduate students: at least some of the data we collect as researchers can be shared without particular embarrassment or jealousy, and without the fear that we might “burn” or underuse them. On the contrary, a certain amount of data which academics collect often remain underused or unused. But such data, if contextualised within one’s own past research activity, can be kept “alive” and perhaps be reborn, virtuously transmitted to other researchers, who may want to make some use of them, citing the original source and therefore generating a proficuous circle of knowledge. Hence, the idea of presenting bites of data from past research endeavours which are currently under use, or momentarily resting in researchers’ hard disks.

We decided to distribute the presentation of a few of these materials over different issues of *Mutual Images*, grouping them by type. In this first instalment (presenting five early interviews from one of my own past projects), we are also suggesting a way to interpret the notion of “research files” for other scholars who in the future may want to experiment it in *Mutual Images*, by proposing their own “raw” data. The format of presentation we have deemed as appropriate—or, at least, admissible and functional—is that of recounting the general features of the original research project within which the data here published were produced, so to favour the circulation of ideas.

### **Layers of aesthetics and ethics in Japanese pop culture**

Here I will try to explain why we chose this particular title for *Mutual Images 7* and its Editorial, through a concise discussion of the inherent themes of the issue’s contents.

The article we publish in this instalment is, as announced before, “*Gaijin Mangaka: The Boundary-Violating Impulse of Japanised ‘Art-Comics’*”, by Portuguese researcher Ana Matilde de Sousa. The paper focuses on a topic which, among many, I particularly fancy both as a scholar of visual media and a person fond of comics and popular arts. It

is a very well informed, up-to-date, and richly illustrated discussion on how, to what degree, and according to what aesthetic and intellectual tactics did international comic artists use graphical and narrational elements which could be generically seen as “originally” pertaining to the praxis of Japanese comics’ languages, styles, registers, and story-telling techniques. De Sousa takes, as case studies, comics from various creators reunited in a special collection, *Gaijin Mangaka*, published in 2016 by Latvian publisher Kuš! as the 25<sup>th</sup> book of a comics anthology series titled *š!*, co-edited by its regular curator, David Shilter, and, for this particular volume, by an Argentinian author, Berliac, who positions himself as a “neo-gekiga” artist—gekiga being that area of Japanese comics characterised by a dramatic attitude, neo-realistic topics and narrative tones, and cruder and often avantgarde-type drawings, inaugurated in the second half of the 1950s by Tatsumi Yoshihiro and other committed, independent artists, such as Tsuge Yoshiharu.

While *Gaijin Mangaka* contains short stories by some authors of the *crème de la crème* of the international comic scene who declaredly homage, cite, or recombine elements which can be acknowledged as “manga-ish” (here the label *mangaesque* introduced by German scholar Jaqueline Berndt comes in as particularly opportune and functional),<sup>2</sup> it is also crucial to underline that Ana Matilda De Sousa herself is one of the artists featured in the book, hence she writes here not only as a scholar but also as an artist.

Among the main assumptions and concepts discussed in the article, there is that according to which “art comics” (comics whose authors engage in a diverse variety of languages, codes, and representational strategies including citation, mimicking, etc. from other art forms) engage in a playful, multi-layered dialectic with mass culture, street culture, and the imagined boundaries between “high” and “low” (popular) arts. The generational factor also plays a relevant role, in that the majority of comic artists who engage in styles reminiscent of or derived from expressive elements of manga were born between the late 1970s and the mid-1990, therefore belonging to a wide age cohort which, in many countries, I could here easily define as a “manga/anime-native generation”, having these artists grown up—like millions of people who are not artists but simply part of a quasi-global audience—enjoying Japanese animated cartoons on television first since they were kids, and (also) manga books then, as teenagers and young adults. In this sense, we could argue that the process by which at least some authors decided to use features of manga was not simply spontaneous, but, up to a point, even unaware, at least

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<sup>2</sup> Jaqueline Berndt introduced and explained this theoretical notion in Berndt 2007, 2012, and 2013.

at first; however, it has to be also added that in the case of the artists dealt with in De Sousa's article, we are before comic makers who have deeply reflected on their own work and are fully aware of what they are doing. De Sousa's essay is not entirely groundbreaking, because a vast theoretical/empirical scholarship on this topic and on many related case studies has, luckily, been produced in the last years;<sup>3</sup> but what is outstanding and intriguing in and about her article—besides its own quality as a nice piece of scholarship—is the self-reflection of an artist/academic whose take is thus revealing. The article also contains a clever discussion on controversial notions, which are perceived and framed in different ways by different scholars (here the intervening factors are not only the discipline and background but also the nationality and therefore different cultural biases), such as “cultural appropriation” and “mukokuseki”, but it is certainly not my goal to personally address these themes whatsoever—not here, anyway.

This article presents several layers of content and implications, binding together in a harmonious discussion Japanese pop art, non-mainstream manga and independent, often self-published international comics production, the cultural background of non-Japanese artists engaging in *mangaesque*-type art comics and alt-comics, deep conceptual categories drawn from structuralist semiotics and late-20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and the discourse of contemporary art criticism, pinning all of this to the concrete cases of the samples of comics displayed in De Sousa's analysis. These are some of the reasons why the general title of this issue of *Mutual Images* mentions the notion of multi-layeredness of Japanese pop culture, also in the wake of the overall themes which the readers will read about in the Research Files section.

Here we are, thus, at introducing the aforementioned new section, adopting a different acceptance of the notion of a multi-layeredness of Japanese pop culture's aesth/ethics.

In the aftermath of the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for years Japanese artists refrained from facing and dealing with that event; among the first to ever approach the bombings explicitly were Iri Maruki (1901-1995) and his wife Toshi (1912-2000): after visiting Hiroshima in the second half of the 1940s, the two artists were shocked by what they saw, and subsequently devoted themselves, for the years to come, to the making of the polyptych *Genbaku no zu* ('Panels of the bomb', 15 paintings of 1,8 x

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Berndt and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2013; Brienza 2015 and, in it, Lamerichs 2015; Pellitteri 2009, 2016, 2018.

7,2 m, 1950-82), in Nihonga style (Maruki) and oil painting (Toshi). The first panels of the series were exhibited in the early 1950s, contributed to start a vivacious cultural debate—the Marukis would also be awarded the Peace Nobel Prize in 1995—and led the way to other artists' production in a variety of formats and media, among which sequential art (in its two stylistic environments of manga and gekiga) and animation (in its two main categories of experimental animation and anime, or technically standardised commercial cartoons); I will come back to comics and animation in a few lines.

The point of these references on visual arts is that the literary and cinematographic discourses on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had already begun in Japan in the bombings' aftermath: let us think of the book *Nagasaki no kane* ('Nagasaki's bells', 1946) by Dr Nagai Takashi, a famous radiologist, and the 1950 film version by Ōba Hideo; the novel *Kuroi ame* ('The black rain', 1950) by Ibuse Masuji; or the semi-fictional film *Hachi no su no kodomotachi* ('Children of the beehive', 1948) by Shimizu Hiroshi and the documentaries *Genbaku no ko* ('Children of the atomic bomb', 1952) by Shindō Kaneto and the more explicit and critical *Hiroshima* (1953) by Sekigawa Hideo. But neither these novels and films, nor the fantastic allegory of Honda Inoshirō's movie *Gojira* (1954), explicitly displayed the nightmare of the graphic, terrifying obliteration of the atomic bombs' victims as they were rendered in some outstanding works of Japanese sequential art and animation issued in the 1970s, by authors such as Tatsumi Yoshihiro or Nakazawa Keiji in gekiga and manga respectively, and animators Kinoshita Renzō and Sayoko, and Mori Masaki and Hirata Toshio, in auteur animation and anime respectively. These manga creators and animators had to struggle with their conscience when they decided to engage in the visual and narrative representations of the "pika-don" (the great explosion) and their effects on the humans and humanity as an idea. Nonetheless, they felt the deep prosocial mission to tell, explain, visualise the unthinkable, for their generation (the *yakeato sedai* or 'generation of the burnt-out ruins') and especially for the future generations, to show, explain, recount the nightmare, so that it would not be forgotten.<sup>4</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011, for a few years many comic artists and animation directors and scriptwriters have hesitated to accept (or decidedly rejected) the several proposals they had been receiving

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<sup>4</sup> This paragraph and the previous are partly drawn from one of the twenty-five entries I wrote for the upcoming *Enciclopedia dell'arte contemporanea* ('Encyclopaedia of contemporary art') of the Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani. This essay, in particular (Pellitteri 2020), is precisely devoted to the theme of atomic bombs in Japanese arts.

from TV stations, local or national political parties, or various committees, to lead artistic works based on the events of Sendai and Fukushima. As some animation directors told me in the interviews I had the privilege to have with them during one of my research projects in Japan in 2013-14 (yes, this is a hint to the Research Files section of this journal), the idea of creating a work on that disaster—even if meant to an educational or commemorative purpose—was for them ill-conceived or at least still premature to be taken into consideration with the due objectivity: animators and manga artists, especially the older ones, felt to be, when facing this event, mainly or only citizens and wanted to preserve a form of pudor and respect for the victims, waiting for some time before (perhaps) deciding to engage in some kind of artistic endeavour related to those facts.

In the end, these were the reasons why we have wanted to title this issue of *Mutual Images* “Layers of aesthetics and ethics in Japanese pop culture”: there are more visible as well as deeper and more hidden strata of choice, engagement, artistic awareness, and morality, in the paths undertaken by Japanese artists (or non-Japanese artists who are at some level hooked by the features of Japanese creative arts), than meets the eye.

I sincerely hope you will enjoy this short, but dense, 7<sup>th</sup> issue of *Mutual Images*.

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