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To what extent has the rise of popularity of manga influenced the evolution of visual storytelling in contemporary illustration?

The growing popularity of manga since the late twentieth century has changed how people consume visual narratives and the general approach to illustration internationally. This essay argues that manga has significantly impacted modern illustration as it has provided visual languages that illustrators have been inspired by and adapted, it has also inspired sequential and cinematic storytelling in single images, and transformed practices through digital tools and online cultures.

To explore how manga has influenced illustration, it's helpful to compare a key mangaka with a contemporary Western illustrator who openly credits manga/anime as a source of inspiration. Osamu Tezuka (1928–1989) is widely recognised as the artist who defined modern manga's narrative style. Tezuka used cinematic framing, montage, and adaptable panel rhythms to show psychological states and story pacing. These techniques set the storytelling standards for future generations (Schodt, 1983). His long-form works, such as *Astro Boy*, *Black Jack*, and *Buddha*, combine close-ups, long shots, and visual repetition to evoke emotion and clarity across pages. (Schodt, 1983)



Fig 1. A page from *Astro Boy*, Vol 1. Osamu Tezuka. 1956.

The page presents a series of panels showing Astro's activation. The close-ups of mechanical parts, mid-shots of the scientist at work, followed by a dramatic close-up of Astro's eyes lighting up, are part of the key features, which also include the varied panel sizes, from long shots to extreme close-ups, and speed lines that convey energy and activation. Minimal shading and exaggerated emotional expressions, especially on the scientist's face, further enhance the scene. Tezuka compresses both mechanical and emotional transformations into a rhythm of panels. The viewer follows the sequence through directional action lines, panel size, and emotional cues such as shocked eyes and sweat drops. This sequence highlights Tezuka's skill in creating cinematic movement on a static page, a technique now essential in manga storytelling.



Fig 2. Echo. Illustration by Lois van Baarle, 2023.

This piece shows a female character underwater as she looks at her reflection. Key features include the emphasis on her large, expressive eyes and face, the implied movement from flowing hair and curving lines, and atmospheric lighting that directs the viewer's attention. Even though it is a single image, the illustration shows a narrative moment, reflecting an internal emotional state and suggesting a sequence. These are storytelling elements that mirror the emotional pauses often found in manga full-page spreads.

While Tezuka uses a full set of panels to show a transformation, Loish presents a similar emotional change in just a single frame. Despite format differences, both artists use cropped close-ups, strong directional flow, expressive facial styles, and a rhythmic composition. This further highlights how manga's visual language, which was initially designed for sequential reading, has influenced modern non-sequential illustrations that now use the same techniques.

Tezuka relies on manga's visual cues like speed lines, sweat drops, and exaggerated expressions, and while Loish doesn't replicate these symbols directly, she adapts them into her work by using flowing forms, dramatic lighting, and soft movements which perform similar functions by creating immediate emotional responses, context, and motion. This suggests that manga's influence extends beyond style into deeper visual communication techniques. Tezuka's transformation scene ends in an emotional reveal that serves both plot and emotional climax, while Loish's illustration centers on the character's emotions as the story's focus. In both cases, emotion drives the narrative moment, a trait of manga's tradition of using expressive exaggeration to connect with the readers.

By comparing the two artists, the influences on modern illustration become evident. Firstly, narrative immediacy shows how illustrators embrace manga's ability to compress stories into powerful frames. Secondly, hybrid visual language suggests that Western illustrators mix realistic lighting with manga inspired expressions, creating emotional styles and cinematic compositions. Therefore, Tezuka's techniques have not just been borrowed, but they have evolved into a new global visual language. Tezuka provided structural guidelines that shape narrative sequencing and emotional shorthand. Loish illustrates how these practices translate into single images where sequential principles tell a story either in one image or in just a social media thumbnail.

To understand manga's impact on illustration, it is important to look at the signs involved in its communication with the viewer. The study of sign systems, including Saussure's signifier/signified model and Barthes' extensions to cultural texts, provides tools for examining how image elements convey meaning (Saussure; Barthes, 1964). Barthes' focus on how signs operate culturally helps identify common manga practices, such as sweat drops, speed lines, and eye shapes as culturally recognized signifiers whose meanings are learned and negotiated. Barthes' framework shows how pictorial motifs serve as "leaves" that carry additional cultural meanings beyond their direct representation (Barthes, 1964).

Cognitive and linguistic research on comics suggests that manga displays a distinct Japanese visual language with recognizable patterns, for example, panel transitions, motion lines, and emotional symbols that work like a type of grammar unique to the practice (Cohn, 2016). Cohn's studies highlight systematic differences between Japanese and Western comic conventions, showing that many signs in manga are normalised ways of representing time, emotions, and movement (Cohn, 2016). These make it possible to gain a fast understanding of the scene and communicate emotions clearly, which are qualities that appeal to illustrators seeking immediate viewer engagement and understanding.

One important semiotic shift is the use of sequential techniques in individual illustrations, as shown by Loish. These techniques were initially meant to guide readers across panels and are now used in modern illustrations to suggest narrative flow or minimise a sequence into one image that tells the whole story. Scott McCloud's theory of closure, which is the mental act of connecting gaps between panels, helps understand why implied sequences in single images, such as motion blur and trailing lines, trigger narrative suggestions for viewers (McCloud, 1993). Manga's semiotics gives illustrators guidelines of movement and story with minimal visual cues. Therefore, when Western illustrators adopt manga symbols, those symbols may change meaning. The original cultural context, such as gender norms or genre expectations, can shift in a new environment. Scholars caution against interpreting these adaptations as neutral, as they are acts of cultural translation that also raise questions about appropriation and reinterpretation (Napier, 2007). This semiotic view highlights both the power and flexibility of manga signs in modern illustration.

Outside of visual signs and styles, the growing popularity of manga has changed the materials, platforms, and teaching methods of modern illustration practice. The increased use of software like Clip Studio Paint, Procreate, and Photoshop, which offer brushes, screentones, and panel templates, has made it a lot easier to create manga-like visuals, therefore many illustrators credit these tools with enabling the adoption of manga techniques in their professional work. Digital brush presets mimicking pen and ink lines, layer blending for cell shading and screentone-like textures make it easy to reproduce and adapt manga aesthetics. This technological advancement has led more illustrators to explore manga derived visual language in both commercial and personal projects. As well as this, online platforms such as DeviantArt, ArtStation, and Instagram allow artists to share process videos, tutorials, and brushes, leading to quick access and adaptation of stylistic choices. Loish's rise in popularity highlights this point, as her early engagement on DeviantArt and consistent tutorial sharing helped define a hybrid style that others seek to replicate and often take inspiration from. Educational resources, like books, online masterclasses, and university courses, now integrate manga techniques into mainstream illustration training (Gravett, 2004), which results in new illustrators learning skills common in both Western illustration and manga's stylized practices.

Furthermore, Manga aesthetics have shown to be commercially viable and are often used in children's publishing, advertising, game art, and character design, prompting businesses and clients to pursue manga inspired visuals. This demand is changing the practice because illustrators are learning to produce quick and expressive faces and strong silhouettes that are

easily recognisable but also easy to replicate, which are aspects vital in manga, to meet commercial needs. The monetization of manga aesthetics is shaping everyday professional illustration work.

The popularisation of manga has impacted modern illustration on various levels. Notable figures like Osamu Tezuka established a narrative framework using cinematic framing, panel rhythm, and emotional shorthand that illustrators have adapted. Current illustrators like Loish show how these techniques can be mixed with Western methods to create new visual styles. Semiotic analysis uncovers why manga's influence continues to resonate in the world of illustration. Finally, changes in practice through digital tools, online platforms and market demand have increased manga influenced styles in illustration. Overall, the rise in popularity of manga has greatly influenced how illustrators approach their work.

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