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Manga Drawing as Stereotyped Aesthetics

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This essay is based on findings of my longitudinal phenomenological research study conducted from 2006 to 2009. The aim of my study was to understand the manga drawings produced by young adolescents in Hong Kong. Based on my findings, I present the argument that these adolescents have derived a conception of beauty from the manga images they have seen in popular visual culture, and that they have the ability to connect this concept with their life experiences. I also argue that their manga productions assist these students in making sense of the world around them.

This essay is based on the findings of my longitudinal phenomenological research study (2006–2009), the aim of which was to understand the kinds of stereotypical manga drawings produced by adolescents in Hong Kong. I offer a conceptual framework to explicate the nature of these adolescents' stereotyped manga drawings. Based on my research, I argue that these adolescents have derived a conception of beauty from manga images they have seen in popular visual culture, and that they connect these conceptions to their life experiences. I believe that their manga drawing assists them in making sense of the world around them.

Copying, Stereotyped Images, Imitation, and Identity

In art education the issue of imitation, copying, and stereotyped images has been addressed from various perspectives. Studies include Wilson and Ligtoet's (1992) study of the stylistic drawing of children, Smith's (1985) investigation of copying and artis-

tic behaviors, and Lackey, Manifold, and Zimmerman's (2007) examination of the gendered stereotypes in children's images. Several studies have addressed the issue of student copying in art classes, on their own and copying either from sources in popular culture or from one another (Duncum, 1988; Stankiewicz, 2001; Thompson & Bales, 1991; Wilson & Wilson, 1985). These studies describe what is often copied in art classes, why copying occurs in student art, or whether or not copying is desirable. Some of these studies have focused on questions about whether students should copy or not, although few studies have been concerned with the aesthetic aspects of stereotyped images created by children. Recent studies of adolescents' drawings suggest that in a school context, adolescents represent in their drawings their social lives and problems they have in reality (Freedman, 2000). It has also been suggested that in art education, students may benefit from copying, since copying can be viewed as a learning process (Eisner, 1972; Pariser, 1980). However, such considerations do not take into account the cultural and aesthetic experiences of young people (adolescents in this case) in creating, appreciating, and copying drawings that are thought by adults to be stereotypes. Since adolescents see, enjoy, and create stereotyped images every day through various media, an investigation into how they understand and reproduce stereotyped images is helpful.

Negative Views of Copying

Although some researchers have started to emphasize the potential positive effects of copying, on children's social lives, some 20th-century researchers focused on the negative effects of children's copying. According to some researchers, stereotypic expression emerges in a particular pattern and may disclose psychological deficiencies (Case, 2000; McNiff, 1981). Stereotypical modes of expression have been regarded as a non-spontaneous type of creative expression indicative of a lack of self-confidence and sense of identity in children (McNiff, 1981). McNiff (1981) observes that the stereotypic expression involves a particular pattern of repetitive, ritualistic, and highly controlled expressions, reflecting an insecure state of mind. As an aspect of control, stereotypic expression is indicative of a tendency to follow a socially prescribed ideal. The stereotypical mode of expression understood as a form of conscious control stands in contrast to what is posited as the nature of genuine creative expression (McNiff, 1981). When expressive ability is blocked, a person becomes "withdrawn or dependent on stereotypic forms of communication" (McNiff, 1981, p. 53). In this line of thinking, the creative process, the creator's free will to express himself or herself, is said to be elevated to the status of a symbol of escaping from social boundaries.

The fact that some children do choose to imitate suggests that there is an ideal model for them to follow. Case observed that children would first imitate an image exactly as they saw it before acquiring sufficient confidence and feeling

capable of visually conveying an idea of their own (Case, 2000). Children seek an ideal model to imitate, reflecting their concern with social recognition (Naumburg, 2001). The act of imitation reflects the wish to possess something, and emulation itself is a “necessary process of gaining identity from a quality form” (Case, 2000, p. 37). Therefore, stereotypic modes of creative expression are considered to be non-spontaneous (Naumburg, 2001). It appears that a child’s self-confidence and feelings about his or her social identity are the factors that influence whether she or he produces stereotyped drawings.

Looking at Manga

Within the context of discussions about student copying and reproduction of stereotypical images, the emergence of students’ manga drawings (imagery copied and adapted from manga imagery appearing in popular culture) is a phenomenon worth investigating. In manga, meaning is created in part through creating and seeing the connections between the images, which often appear in sequences that tell stories (Xiao, 2002). In order to see these connections, the psychological involvement of the reader is required. In this line of thinking, readers can play an active role in creating a new meaning—a meaning that is related to their everyday lives (Lau, 2011). This consideration of the relationship of images produced to the lives of their producers is highly relevant in attempting to understand student manga drawings.

As has been mentioned earlier in this essay, stereotypes in young people’s images are often developed according to a pattern (Barker, 1989). Xiao argues that it is the formalized structure of popular culture that provides student manga creators with ready-made patterns or models from which to appropriate (or copy) to produce their own stereotyped manga drawings (2002). Xiao further observes that the stereotypes, characters, and stories typically found in student manga reflect the fact that human productions and the ideologies underlying these productions are socially constructed and transferred across social groups. Other studies of manga have focused on the content and the form of stereotyped manga drawings and the advantages and disadvantages of using them in educational contexts (Toku, 2001). But few studies have examined the interrelationship between the meanings, modes of artistic expression, and the creative process in the stereotyped manga drawings created by adolescents from the perspective of their own aesthetic experience. Also, little research has been conducted into the reasons why adolescents admire particular manga characters or why they choose to depict their manga images in particular ways.

Method of Investigation

Three questions guided my study: (a) What meanings do adolescents derive from the images of popular visual culture as adopted in their own manga creations? (b)

Why do they create these images in this particular way? and (c) How do they interpret the creative process that leads to the production of these manga artworks? A phenomenological research approach used in my study was adapted from a method of analysis refined by van Manen (1997). Phenomenology emphasizes the nature and power of data to represent the life-world and lived experience of the subjects, by revealing the meanings through a structural, systematic analysis, and self-reflection (van Manen, 1997).

Eight 13-year-old students at junior secondary schools in Hong Kong were selected to participate in this longitudinal study, which was conducted over the period 2006–2009. The same kinds of data were collected each year. The students were all given pseudonyms: Jack, Kei, KH, KW, Fish, Yin, Nie, and Yan. I designed a manga drawing curriculum for the study. This involved 60 sessions conducted bi-weekly after school hours. Each session was 80 minutes in duration. In the first session, the students created their own characters. In each of the subsequent sessions, they were free to develop manga stories around these characters and were asked to write down explanations of the images they created. All sessions and interviews were recorded using a video camera and were later transcribed. The principle of maintaining the anonymity and privacy of the students was strictly adhered to at all times.

After the first session, an informal interview was conducted with each student. A questionnaire was distributed in the last session. In addition, an in-depth interview was held with each student for evaluation purposes. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions that asked about students' thoughts and experiences of artistic creation and their artwork and creative processes, or that focused on one particular issue that seemed relevant to a particular student, for example: What does manga mean to you? Questions also included queries about students' beliefs about beauty and value in art, their manga creations, and satisfaction with their drawings. Students' comments and images were grouped together and categorized conceptually (van Manen, 1997). Textual and structural descriptions were identified in interview data and images collected, based on the clustered themes or ideas emerging in students' responses. Interpretations of these clusters and themes followed. Through this process, several principal themes emerged, as discussed in the following section.

Explication of Findings

Socio-cultural Influences and Personal Intentions. Students participating in my study showed much interest in the aesthetic form and meanings of their manga drawings. For instance, Jack responded, "It's not Japanese manga affecting me; it's the character that represents my thinking and reflects my views on things." The images created by the students also reflected a balance between illusion, realism, and

intended meanings, as reflected in another student response: “With regard to the meanings of the magic besom, silver hair and deep red eyeballs of my protagonist,” Kei contended, “these are my symbols reflecting my wishes and imagination.” In other words, the manga stories these students created were related to their experiences and their desires to convey their own stories. They localized the context of their stories depicted, changing the original content of appropriated manga imagery and characters by incorporating experiences from their daily lives into their manga stories. As KH stated, “I changed the original story, the appearance and the character, adding my personality to edit the storylines so as to represent me.” This localization creates a link between artistic expression and the students’ problems in the real world. For example, Fish declared: “The protagonist can change my attitude and my thoughts.” She explained: “It works because the beauty that emerges in manga gives me an insight into myself and my life.” She acknowledged: “The popular culture becomes popular because of the beauty we recognize in it.” Fish further suggested that the “stereotyped images [found throughout popular culture]” provided “great opportunities for students to learn, follow, and carefully study the secret of beauty.”

The protagonist in these students’ manga functions as an ideal icon (a symbol representing an ideal, often appropriated from other manga depictions that the students admired). The idealized icon they depicted as their protagonists in their manga stories indicated that their selections were made in ways that reflected idealized stereotypes typically found in manga. But their own manga icons also have significant meanings for these students. Students shared similar reflections about their experience and use of these particular kinds of stereotyped icons. They all recognized, believed in, and evaluated the stereotyped imagery of manga, and used this particular aesthetic form to create their own images, utilizing words such as “beauty” or “cuteness” to describe their ideals, as suggested by Yin. For example, Yan claimed that Japanese manga affected her ideas about “beauty.” She admired the “concept of beauty established by the Japanese manga.” She said, “Japanese manga is so beautiful that everyone likes it and regards it as a learning model.” For Yin, “Creating manga is a process of learning from beauty. Learning from beauty is about learning how to judge the image—whether it is beautiful or ugly.” She expanded on her definition of beauty: “Beauty means blinking eyes, a beautiful face, long hair and a perfect human figure. They represent a stereotypical form. It is the principle of beauty.” From such statements, it appears that an ideal icon has an aesthetic character in the minds of these students. Idealized icons represent a specific kind of stereotype, and they can also be transformed into something the students can relate to: an art medium connecting the aesthetic concept and the real world.

Students’ iconic images of protagonists also incorporated the students’ own personal goals and characteristics. Jack, for instance, wrote: “By practic-

ing drawing the perfect image, I can improve myself because it is my ideal icon to follow.” It seems that a socio-cultural influence extends to this artistic form (manga) and that concepts of beauty and perfection are well recognized by peer groups. But it is important to note that these students’ interest was indicative of their search for a particular aesthetic form (the appearance of their depiction and the meanings they conveyed), but not of any specific interest in the culture from which it was derived.

Stereotyped and Counter-Stereotyped Imagery. Students who took part in my study used a combination of stereotyped and what I refer to as “counter-stereotyped” artistic representations to create images of their protagonists. Figure 1 presents a comparison between three different examples of the stereotyped depictions of faces produced by three students. These images reflect their intentions to create images following a particular artistic form that conforms to stereotypical manga representations. This confirm Toku’s (2001) proposition that the facial features of a manga drawing generally appear in a conventional form.

The stereotyped facial expression of the protagonist			
Students	Jack	Kei	Yin
The image
The deconstruction of the details			
Mouth
Face
Hair

Figure 1. A comparison of the stereotyped depictions of the facial expression.

According to the accounts given by the students, the eyes are the most important part of the face, and depictions of eyes demonstrate a strictly stereotyped form of artistic expression. These eyes are bright and sparkling and take up roughly half of the total area of the face. According to Yin, “[y]ou should be concerned with drawing the eyes, the face and hair exactly as they are seen in the original image of Japanese manga. The final work can distinguish between beautiful and ugly images according to these criteria.” Other students, such as Fish, put more detail into the eyes: “Eyes and hair represent the most important aspects of the spirit of beauty.” The depiction of the nose, mouth, and shape of the face also appears to take a stereotyped form. This simplified method of depiction can also be seen in the mouth and the outline of the face. Like the eyes, in stereotyped facial features, the hairstyle was more difficult to draw than other features because, according to one student, Nie, it “represents the quality of the stereotyped aesthetic.”

As these descriptions indicate, students were concerned with conveying conceptions about beauty, which also meant having value. According to the students, the concept of beauty can be divided into two types: stereotyped beauty and non-stereotyped beauty. Although the two types of beauty are mutually contradictory, they play an essential role in making it possible to understand the images created by adolescents. These students were concerned with being able to reproduce both the stereotyped and the counter-stereotyped aesthetic forms, since these represent, respectively, the benchmarks for successful self-transformation and an affirmation of self-identity.

All the drawings created by the students in this study conform to some version of stereotyped manga imagery. Additionally, all of their representations of the human figure, with the exception of Yin's, match the requirements of realism, in which proportion and volume are based on realistic considerations. This indicates that the depiction of the face is constrained by the stereotyped manga aesthetic (conventions of style), while that of the body is not. In the drawing of the human figure, the students appear to have allowed themselves more flexibility. The human figure and their depictions of what people were actually doing were changeable, constituting a more spontaneous form of expression that was based on the individual student's artistic ability, his or her preference for realism, and his or her own intended meanings. Yan shared: “The eyes, face, and hairstyle cannot be changed. They are fixed forms. But the story and the appearance and movements should be changed to represent you.” A similar comment was made by Jack: “The eyes and face must not be changed; you can only change the body, the movements, even the story.” This particular phenomenon contradicts the idea that students adhere to a predictable stereotyped aesthetic in their manga depictions. The term “counter-stereotyped aesthetics” is applied here to describe this phenomenon and the specific form of artistic expression employed by the students. Although the head and body with their

inconsistent styles of representation are integrated to form a whole and are presented in the same image, the two different artistic styles coexist paradoxically.

The Centaur Phenomenon. The concept of the centaur is useful in my discussion of the use of a combination of stereotyped and counter-stereotyped aesthetics within the same image. The centaur phenomenon may be used to describe the particular type of split form that the students who took part in this study adopted to present their images. The centaur is an important symbol of self-transformation, since the successful integration of both aspects of the centaur contributes to the student's successful resolution of his or her problems in the real world. For example, Fish commented: "My poor academic performance will be improved if I can draw a pretty image with a beautiful head and free body movements; it helps me establish my confidence." This paradoxical entity can be used harmoniously and metaphorically to reveal the meaning of the image. The upper part of the centaur, as the head, represents the stereotyped aesthetic representation, while the lower part, as the body, represents the counter-stereotyped aesthetic representation, in which the human body usually appears as a realistic form. More intelligence and more sophisticated drawing skills are required to depict the realistic form of the human body. In Figure 2 are three examples illustrating the centaur phenomenon.

By splitting the centaur into two, it is possible to make a comparison between the head and the body. Significantly, two different artistic styles are found to coexist in the same image. The depiction of the head is strictly structured according to socio-cultural conventions of manga style, and is therefore less influenced by the creator's own style and intention. The depiction of the human body, in contrast, reflects the individual's ability and acquired learning from observation and practice, and is thus subject to influence from the individual student's

Students		KH	Fish	Yin
The centaur	Image of the head
	Image of human figure

Figure 2. The centaur phenomenon in the image.

meanings and intentions. These strategies become student self-imposed criteria for judging the quality of their representation of beauty.

The counter-stereotyped artistic style used by my study participants to depict the human body may be described as being freed of the conventions of manga style (see Figure 3). Yet there are exceptions to this finding. In most of the students' manga images, the depiction of the proportions of the human figure is realistic and does not conform to specific manga conventions. Yin's images, by contrast, conform more fully to the stereotyped manga modes of depicting both facial and bodily features in accordance with an exaggerated cartoon style. In one of Yin's unfinished human figures, the depiction of the hand reflects her lack of observation of detail. Yin's imagery shows her attempt to portray activity or continuous movement by depicting the girl waving her arms quickly. They demonstrate her failure to break away from the stereotyped mode of artistic expression. The result is that she has maintained the stereotyped form of expression throughout and depicted her entire image in the cartoon style. Yin's resistance to and avoidance of adopting a more realistic mode of expression for the human body reflects the influence of an insufficient amount of self-confidence in her drawing ability.

The centaur is a mixed entity combining real and imaginative aspects. It is a paradoxical but unified entity, projecting the creator's conception of both the stereotyped and counter-stereotyped representations of aesthetics. It is a reflection and an evaluation of the creator, through which the creator can find out whether he or she can transform himself or herself by means of the stereotyped and counter-stereotyped forms of representation. The centaur is an important symbol of self-transformation, as its successful aesthetic integration points to the student's success in seeking a solution to his or her real-world problems.

Students	KW	Yin	Yan
The human body

Figure 3. The counter-stereotyped expression of the human body.

Conclusion

These students all used similar symbols to depict the faces of their protagonists. These signs are stereotyped and function as symbols, demonstrating the norms of stereotyped modes of artistic expression. The students' depictions of eyes are more sophisticated than those of any other facial features, and thus are the essence of the stereotyped aesthetic of manga faces. This phenomenon applied to all the students who took part in this study. Both the drawings and the comments of these students about this stereotyped artistic form of expression reflect the fact that manga creation involves a collective cognitive activity in which the use of stereotyped forms of artistic expression is accepted.

When the students create images, they appropriate but do not necessarily think critically about socio-cultural influences that shape their work. The perfected and socially valued forms presented in popular Japanese manga do interest them, and therefore they do critically think about and review the particular aesthetics and conventions of style involved in their own manga imagery. Students show much appreciation for the formal qualities and style of Japanese manga, and Japanese manga establishes the criteria for the portrayal of beauty projected in the characters these students created in their manga drawings. They did not question such conceptions of beauty, nor did they consider the socio-cultural contexts in which these conceptions have been produced. Students combined both stereotyped and counter-stereotyped aesthetic qualities in their manga drawings, represented by the symbol of the centaur. I believe that such combinations facilitate their journey of transformation, as they adopt and adapt socially approved conventions of manga style in their own drawings. The centaur (manga drawing strategy) represents an entity combining cognitive understanding, learning, and psychological aspects of adolescents' art making, and as such, the centaur plays an important role in students' self-actualization in their drawings. Such a consideration suggests that students can benefit from copying and shows how their creation and repeated practice of stereotyped drawings can be viewed as a learning process, as suggested by Pariser (1980).

My study found no evidence to support Lowenfeld and Brittain's (1987) claim that copying results in the loss of children's ideas and the diminishing of their creativity. Rather, in my research it was found that copying is a cognitive and aesthetic activity involving planning, in which students depict their own experiences, ideas, and intentions, similar to findings put forward by Freedman (2000) and Wilson and Wilson (1985). My study also raises several considerations worth further research when attempting to understand images of popular visual culture created by young adolescents. First, it demonstrates that students' creative intentions as revealed in their drawings are both a socio-cultural phenomenon and a

personal phenomenon influenced by both stereotyped and counter-stereotyped socio-cultural conventions. Second, the psycho-cognitive and artistic processes involved in student creation of stereotyped and counter-stereotyped imagery is informed by their individual psychological states and desires, their learning behaviors, and their sense of self-identity. Third, images created by the students have their own unique characteristics shaped by socio-cultural, psychological, and educational factors. All three of these considerations seem to require systematic study to more fully understand their implications for student art making and art education practices in the classroom.

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