Manga and the Transmission of Culture:
The Example of *Rurouni Kenshin*

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In modern society everything changes and modernizes at such a high speed that we feel we are always running after something. As if a principle of obsolescence existed, parodying the principle of uncertainty, it seems to us that every time we buy something new, the money injected in the system is used to create something more modern.

From this point of view, everything should evolve, and this evolution should be what decrees the retirement of a thing's antecessor. And this actually does occur with such things as cars, machines, and computers. Fortunately, there are "things" that endure time, among them traditional art. Paintings are still valuable, "ancient" music is still played with medieval instruments. We could risk saying that generally when the idea is more important than the medium or media, it tends to keep itself resistant to changes, inversely of what occurs when the medium is the final product.

We cannot take this as a certainty but rather as a possibility that can help to explain the object of this work: the *manga*. Given the time of existence of *mangas*, in evolutional terms little has been done in its medium, but perhaps the ideas are more contemporary. A little monochromatic book or periodical made in newsprint, so we can define the most popular and traditional *manga* format, *tankōbon* 単行本. However—we cannot delude ourselves—within this humble appearance, there can hide worlds and stories that are, many times, more complex than real life.

Analogously to the Roman policy of "bread and circuses." in which food (the bread) and entertainment (the circuses) were given to the people, the *manga* would be as a circus to the Japanese. Sometimes even more than that because in them we can find fantasies, frustrations, history, culture, thus being not only an entertainment, but a reflex of a society. In Brazil we still have a range of hindrances that make it difficult for us to know exactly what the *manga* is useful for, and it is one of the foci of this essay to address this.

In my research I have tried to assemble data and opinions in order to show how much the *manga* can be seen as a medium of transmission of knowledge and culture or even as an educational tool. Thousands of titles exist, and here I have chosen one in particular, *Rurouni Kenshin* (*Samurai X*), to serve as example and test object for a deeper analysis of the content that can be incorporated in the main plot.

Just to illustrate one of the initial functions of the *manga*, in Brazil, for a good time the Japanese and their descendents used it to keep the Japanese language updated. And, indeed, in the comics the latest slang phrases, customs, and fashions are always used.

In Japan this function of language updating obviously did not exist, what then would be the function of *manga*? Just entertainment or something else? This work will try to expose the Japanese view of the *manga*, showing that some ideas are similar to ours, but others are a cold shower to our

expectations. Even though, these differences are valid to show that many times we are living and describing an academic world that is often far from the people's reality. Not that some Japanese has said "I hate *manga*," but the perception of some or lack of it shows us that we have to be careful on making analyses of something which, so embedded it is in Japanese culture, can have uses and interpretations different than us Brazilians can see. As the eskimo who sees ten kinds of white, Japanese see the *manga* from many angles, often angles that we will never see.

The *manga* used as reference is called *Rurouni Kenshin* (known as *Samurai X* in Brazil). The events that are based on or are faithful to the reality from the author's point of view were listed. The faithful reproduction of the story by itself may not mean much to the *manga*, and maybe the author has not even worried much about it, but the interpretation that is taken from it or from the form how the readers perceive this reality is one of the foci of this study. In the course of this work, more detailed analyses of some aspects such as architecture, dressing, language and drawing techniques were shown.

Certainly, many facts quoted are well known and there can be several views or interpretations of the same, hence, before critics arise, we will make some explanations. The quoted information were based on what is told in the story existing in the *manga Rurouni Kenshin*. As it is not a book about Japanese history, but a *manga*, the themes are dealt with a superficial outline and not always faithful to the official books.

The demonstration of the subjects previously quoted does not fit in this small resume, but we can leave the example of the analysis that has been made on the theme linguistic resources. The Japanese language makes much use of onomatopoeia, and in the *manga* these are made highly visibile through the stylized form and placement of the characters (kana) that represent the sounds. There is even the counting, which the author himself has done, of how many times the word "*oro oro*" was used. Translated it would be something like "oh-oh" in the sense of pain or for having made something wrong, or yet, for not knowing what to say or do. Altogether "*oro oro*" is used 98 times in the course of the story, and maybe it is one of the few onomatopoeias that has been translated literally.
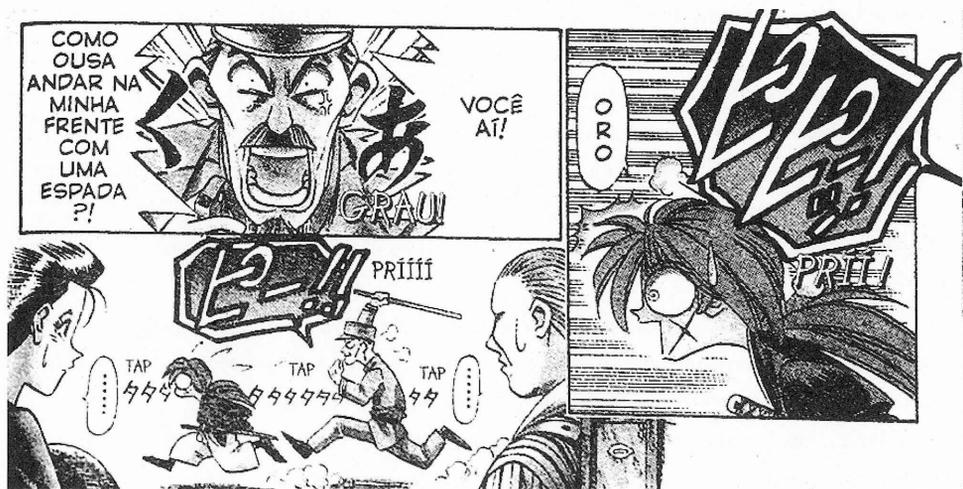
Fig. 1 Selection from *Samurai X*, vol. 4.

Perhaps what gives more dynamism to the *manga* is the visual use of onomatopoeia. In Japanese there are innumerable onomatopoeias, but in Portuguese this number is very reduced, what may complicate the translation of some of them. In the English version the translation of onomatopeias has not even existed and, in Portuguese, a small transliteration can be noticed along the original text in Japanese.

In the picture above we can see that the word "*gajaan*" ガジャアン was adapted to "tum." In this case the use was relatively correct, since it had to show that there was an impact. However, "*gajaan*" can be understood as an impact that came from something which was thrown, in movement, while the "tum" seems to us as something a little dry, lifeless. The form "*gajaan*" is written also helps to understand its meaning, the word has "sharp edges" as something that hurts and comes lightning-shaped.

Here we have another example, the onomatopoeia "ゴゴゴ…" (*go go go* . . .), referring to motor or ship noise, was adapted as "wooom wooom. . . ." In this case it depends on the personal interpretation to know if we have arrived close to the meaning in Japanese, also because "wooom" can be understood as a car noise, that is, far from being a ship rumble.

In other translations maybe the result has been closer to the expected, as in the following examples.

In this example we have the "*gaya*" ガヤ being repeated, as it was a background noise of

Fig. 2 Selection from *Samurai X*, vol. 1.

Fig. 3 Selection from *Samurai X*, vol. 12.

people talking. The adaptation was "blá blá. . . ," which corresponds well to the original.

In some cases we have "*zashuu*" ザシュウ as it was a blade cutting something. The drawing with sharp edges alludes to something sharp, cutting. The translation in its turn was "Tchzwaa." a word that we can barely pronounce. Will that really be the sound of a swordblade?

We could go on describing each onomatopeia that appears in the *manga*, but this would create perhaps another dissertation, so extensive and complex this is. Hence we believe that for this work the quoted examples are sufficient to explain what can occur in the interpretation and adaptation of these onomatopeias. The *manga* universe is very large, therefore the conclusions of this work reflect only a small part of this world of comics that is still a very little explored field. The intention was to show one of the innumerable manners in which we can understand and use the *manga*. We could

Fig. 4 Selection from *Samurai X*, vol. 2.
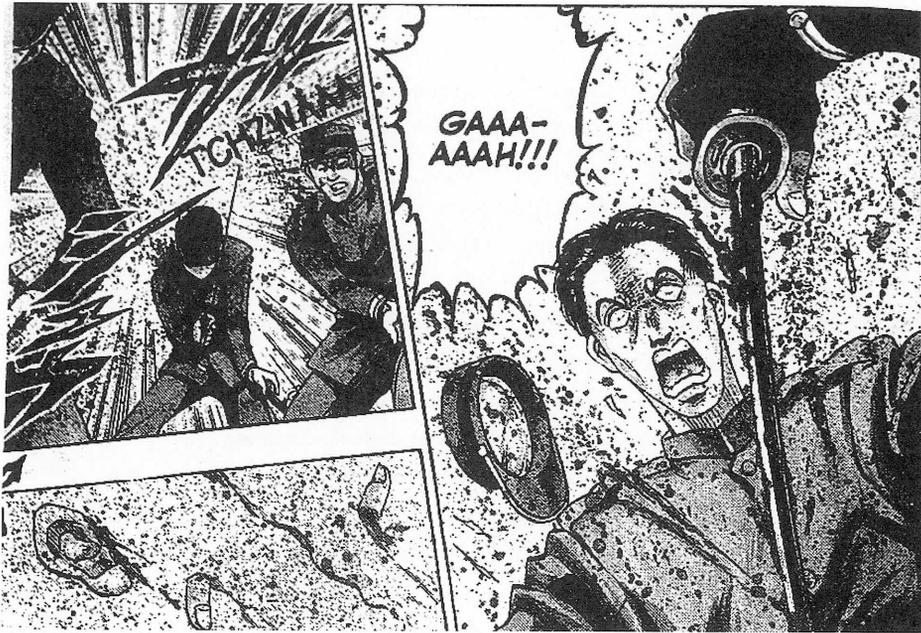
Fig. 5 Selection from *Samurai X*, vol. 1.

notice similarities and differences related to the *manga* in the understanding of a Japanese person and of a non-Japanese person.

The similarities are more connected to the fact that the *manga* is always connected to entertainment, to fun. The study of *manga* as a medium, as a teaching tool, or as a culture transmission tool still is a very incipient thing in the whole world, including Japan. It is still necessary to overcome this little prejudice to be able to work the theoretical part of the Japanese *manga*. Maybe this is the reason that approaches the understanding of the *manga* in the West as a style, closer to the arts than to the teaching tools. We do not expect that the *manga* will have a function similar to that of the textbook, but its content can be deeper than mere entertainment. We do not know yet what is the depth to which we refer, but, with more works in the field, maybe we can understand if we are talking about a puddle or a well.

Understanding the *manga* as a style was a mere simplification or resume of what exists regarding comics in Japan. There can be *manga* with the line-drawing identical to Marvel comics, and nevertheless they would still be *manga*. Understanding the *manga* as being only comics is a Japanese characteristic. Now in the West understanding it as style is the most common, but possibly, what is not noticed at first sight is that the content and the structural form of a Japanese *manga* are what make it be perceived as a typically Nipponese product. We would know that the *battousai* story is Japanese, even if they were drawn as the *X-men*, for instance. And indeed many characters of the story analyzed here had the "Marvel look."

In the case of the *Rurouni Kenshin* story we could see this presented historical content associated to a line-drawing identified as Japanese. It was possible to raise innumerable elements that show the depth of the foundation for the Kenshin story. From architecture to the historical component, we can have good references of the reality we know. For an outsider or a beginner, the

information contained in the *manga* can be used to know and understand a little of the Japanese culture and history. This way, directly or not, there is a transmission of culture, of knowledge. We do not consider the possibility of inserting *manga* commercial titles as classroom reading, but we imagine that it would be possible to exemplify the textbook contents with existing passages in the *manga*. The function of Japanese language upkeep for the immigrants is not very used anymore for globalization allows that other teaching media be more effective than the *manga*. However, the *manga* still can be a way of creating motivation to study the Japanese language. A reader who starts to read the Japanese *manga* should note with the progress of reading that it is necessary to understand the Japanese language if he wants to understand the story in its fullness. Hence we can see in the Japanese language schools many non-Japanese descendents wanting to learn the language, in equal or often superior number than the *nikkei* (Japanese descendents) themselves. We do not know the reason of the reduction of the number of *nikkei* who study the Japanese language, but the *manga* could be used to rescue this desire to learn the culture and language of their ancestors.

The language is a very important element to understand the Japanese *manga*. Unfortunately it is not always possible to translate coherently and completely all the content present in the drawing. The drawing is a very important component of the *manga*, but often, as we could see in the analyses, the form the language is used, mainly with the onomatopoeias, can influence the way a message is transmitted. To understand the superficial or explicit the drawings would be enough, but the nuances and details of Japanese culture maybe are only perceived with a full comprehension of the *manga*, that is, of language and form.

This work sought to analyze some aspects which allow to initiate a conceptual and formal analysis of the *manga*. From this small survey we can conclude that the *manga* is, without doubt, a very complete tool which allows the transmission of knowledge. It falls to the readers to identify the points that can be useful to a particular function. Possibly the Japanese do not need, and maybe do not even want, to look for a function for the *manga*, but for the Westerners such classification can be interesting. For instance, if the function of the *manga* would be only entertainment, a superficial comprehension is enough, that is, the drawings and sayings translated in a simple way would be enough. On the other hand, if the function is to understand the Japanese culture, a more complex comprehension of the drawing, the language, the structure of the frame, the social and historical implications would be necessary.

Thus, be it for entertainment or for cultural diffusion, the *manga* establishes itself as a very versatile tool and one of easy penetration. Possibly the *manga* has qualities and uses not described yet and we expect that, in the future, more works be done on its regard. This way we believe that there will arise new discoveries about this excellent tool that is the *manga*.

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