COMICS VS MANHWA – BETWEEN CULTURAL THEMES AND THE INFLUENCE OF WAR

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Abstract: Using pictures accompanied or not by text has been a wide-spread means of story-telling, which has evolved into something that we nowadays call "comics", a genre that has emerged in or has been adopted by different cultures. In this paper we attempt to draw a short picture of the history of comics, and how they developed in time, whilst highlighting potential differences between comics drawn in the Western part of the world and in Korea and trying to understand what they actually represent in each culture. As comic books helped reinforce culturally dominant themes at certain key-points in Western history, manhwa are considered a mirror of Korean society and customs as well, having diverse themes taken from the community's reality, that vary from episodes in the vast Korean history to topical issues from daily modern life, and are set in places varying from the metropolis to marginal villages and presenting the life of Seoulites, nobles and provincials altogether. On theme that can be encountered in both comics and manhwa is that of war, and how was shaped and influenced collective consciousness.

Keywords: comics studies, manhwa, war comic, cultural themes, colonial period, han

I. Historical overview and definition

In this paper we will dwell upon the meaning of „comics", in all the forms that they might take, and upon their cultural significance as a literary genre. „Comics" are a literary phenomenon that appeared not only in the Western world, but all over the globe, and our focus in this paper will be to compare Western[1] comics (American and British) to Korean comics, known as Manhwa. We try to draw this comparison as comics studies are still developing as an academic field and the output of articles in this regard is still infrequent, as is the mentioning of other types of comics but those that have emerged in the West. More so, we are trying to draw attention to the Korean form of drawing comics, and the importance and impact that they had in the Korean society through the various themes that they tackled throughout history, highlighting the one theme that seems to recur in comics drawn in both sides of the globe.

Comic books, graphic novels, bandes dessinée, historieta, manga, manhwa, all are names given to what Eisner (1985) describes as "sequential art". Even though some academics consider comics (comic books and graphic novels) to be two different types of literary genre, others use the two terms interchangeably. Lim Yeojoo cites two scholars, when he talks about these differences between comic books and graphic novels in his paper, as follows:

> "(Wolk and Versaci) acknowledge the physical differences between comic books and graphic novels. Generally speaking, comic books are "thin, saddle-stitched pamphlets"

[1] We use the word "Western" in this paper in reference to the Western world and Western cultures, and not to the American subgenre of comics.

> that are "serialized in twenty-to-forty-page instalments" and graphic novels are "virtually any square bound volume of comics" (Wolk, 2007, p. 61). Graphic novels can be a collected volume of comic books that initially appeared in pamphlet forms or they can be an original publication." (Lim, 2012)

Versaci continues to say that: "While comic books are classified as "disposable reading" because of their looser format, graphic novels have a thick spine so that they can sit stably on the bookshelf in bookstores and libraries just like other "real books"" (Versaci, 2007)

Despite these differences between them, comic books and graphic novels basically function based on the same principle: they are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" according to McCloud's definition (1993), thus we will refer to both forms as "comics" throughout our paper. We also need to include Kunzle's definition, one that captures the idea behind not only modern comics, but also that behind the early comic strips as well. His timeless definition states that:

> "…I would propose a definition in which a "comic strip" of any period, in any country, fulfils [sic] the following conditions: 1) There must be a sequence of separate images; 2) There must be a preponderance of image over text; 3) The medium in which the strip appears and for which it was originally intended must be reproductive, that is, in printed form, a mass medium; 4) The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical" (Kunzle, 1973)

Scott McCloud also mentions in his book (1993) that comics can have, in fact, many definitions and that it is actually hard to come up with a definition that incorporates all the meanings of a comic. He does start from Eisner's definition of "sequential art", but acknowledges that the definition is not complete, and in fact could be applied to other forms of art that use some sort of sequence of images and other elements as well (sound, for example), such as film, thus the definition not pertaining completely to comics, and keeps adding to it in order to capture the full meaning of a „comic", getting to "juxtaposed sequential visual art" and "juxtaposed sequential static images", before settling with the previously cited definition of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence…". He is also one of the few to acknowledge that comics also reinforce culturally dominant themes. Jenkins (2012) says about McCloud that:

> "(McCloud) was trying to distinguish comics as a medium, capable of telling more stories, from its domination by the superhero genre. In doing so, McCloud expanded the historic and cultural context for reading comics, incorporating examples from Asian, European, and American independent and underground traditions, and linking comics to earlier expressive forms, such as Aztec codices and medieval tapestries." (Jenkins, 2012)

The Korean word for comics has, however a broader definition, which will be discussed later on in this paper.

If we are to start from McCloud's definition, as he himself admits, the word comic could take us back to ancient times. Lim (2012) acknowledges this as well, and cites another critic, Stan Tychinski in order to defend his statement: "From the cave paintings of the Cro-Magnon to the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt, graphic storytelling has been in use as a popular means for communicating thoughts and ideas" (Tychinski, 2004). And in fact it is true. All the examples given by Lim (2012) or McCloud (1993), such as: the Cro-Magnon cave paintings, the Bayeux Tapestry, Trajan's Column, or "The Tortures of Saint Erasmus" print from the 15th Century, all of them are representations of sequential images that tell a story, even though there is no text. They are their creator's means of storytelling.

II. Western Comics

One of the purposes of our paper is to highlight the differences between Western and Korean cultures through an analysis of the meaning and importance of comics in each culture. We will further discuss what comics represent in said cultures, starting with the West.

John Petty (2006) draws an actual timeline of the evolution of comic books in the West, dividing it into several ages, as it follows: The Pioneer Age (1500-1828), The Victorian Age (1828-1883), The Platinum Age (1883-1938), The Golden Age (1938-1949), The Atomic Age (1949-1956), The Silver Age (1956-1970), The Bronze Age (1970-1980) and The Modern Age (1980 – Present). According to the author, each "age" of comics has been influenced by the political, social and economic reality of those times.

In the West, Rodolphe Topffer is believed to be the father of "modern comics" (Lim, 2012). He was a Swiss caricaturist known for his "graphic literature" (Booker, 2014), McCloud describing his caricatures as "light satiric picture stories, starting in the mid-1800's, employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured words and pictures seen in Europe" (McCloud, 1993). Comics started to gain more and more popularity, and became "perpetuated and refined in weekly and monthly humour magazines in the nineteenth century" (Harvey, 2009) with England being "at the forefront of this development" (Lim, 2012). Lim (2012) also draws distinction between two types of comics that could be found in magazines, namely "political cartoons " and "purely cartoons".

Although the "cartoons" were extremely popular in 19th century Europe, it is widely believed that comic books were first made popular in the United States, John Petty (2006) claiming that the beginning of the "true comics", how he calls them, was in the year 1895: "true comics began on May 5, 1895 in the pages of the New York World with the first appearance of R.F. Outcault's "Hogan's Alley", but doesn't disregard the fact that Outcault might have been himself inspired by the social documentary photographer Jacob Riis, or cartoonist Michael Angelo Woolf. The first actual modern comic book, however, was "Famous Funnies", first published in 1934.

As we mentioned before, England was at the forefront of the development of comics, and as we cross the Atlantic, we find the first published British comic, "Ally Sloper's Half Holiday", dating from 1884, thought to be the first comic magazine to

feature a recurring character, namely Ally Sloper (Birch, 2009), comic which made reference to the Victorian practice of workers going home at lunchtime on Saturdays. The comic was also aimed at an adult public (Sringhall, 1994), comics targeting children appearing later on. After Ally's long run, Britain gave the world "The Beano" and "The Dandy", serialized in the 1930's. With time, beside the British comics, American ones began to gain enormous popularity in the UK, for example action comics like Superman, and other super hero comics as well.

We could say that the "real" or "modern" comic has been well represented in European and British literary history, with publications dating since the 19th century, the same as the United States, and in fact the development of comics on both sides of the Atlantic has been similar. Baetens also backs up this idea, saying that:

> "One might say that this literary turn is a European reappropriation of the graphic novel - first coined as a concept in the United States and now more and more used as a genre label in Europe, where the graphic novel existed as a cultural practice, yet not as a recognizably labelled item. I do not think it is very rewarding to overemphasize the cultural differences or analogies between the two sides of the Atlantic. After all, comics and graphic novels are a good example of transcontinental exchange and dialogue." (Baetens, 2008)

As was mentioned before, the two cultures that we bring into discussion in this paper treat the idea of comics in somewhat different ways, the genre having also evolved differently in these two parts of the world (West vs East), not only from a literary point of view, but also from the point of view of their social relevance, to even the medium through which they are comprised, organized and delivered to their target readers. It is our opinion that these differences have been influenced throughout history by the social, political and economic reality of each culture. In the West, the reason why Superman became so popular was the fact that, according to Petty: " in the late 1930s…during this time, America was a nation of immigrants. People were coming from all over the world in search of "The American Dream." Superman, as the last survivor of the doomed planet Krypton, is the ultimate immigrant." (Petty, 2006), thus many people could find themselves in the character. Superman became popular in the UK as well, as immigrants started to move there. Perry also links the popularity of super heroes in the 40's with The Second World War, a representation of good guys fighting the bad guys. Actually, in Britain "comics have a long history of political expression and consciousness, much of which has been used to effectively exploit dominant ideas of the status quo."(MacCallum-Stewart, 2003). MacCallum-Stewart continues to say that:

> " [the] British war comic has not only continued to express ideas of patriotism and sword-rattling long after supposedly 'anti-war' themes had established themselves in mainstream culture, but has then found ways to subvert these ideas, producing dissident texts which provide original and challenging voices." (2003)

This idea of idealism that was diffused in times of war, continued to be conveyed in comics long after the two World Wars as well: "The highly distinctive attitudes of early

twentieth century idealism towards warfare and combat were continued in comics long after they had been contained and diluted in other mediums" (MacCallum-Stewart, 2003). While talking about this particular theme in comics, the author also considers that:

> "It is still possible to identify reflections of this idealism in many modern narratives. War discourses are frequently relocated in science fiction or fantasy settings whilst continuing to express ideas which bear strong .War comics therefore became a self-perpetuating sub-genre which has largely remained unchallenged by its peers as well as by more general critique from academic and popularist critics. Pre-war ideals of courage, nobility and chivalry remain dominant within their narratives" (MacCallum-Stewart, 2003)

After the military threats started to fade and the world started to calm down, the themes that comics used to approach changed as well. Readers became interested in crime stories and horror, themes that they found entertaining. Petty notices:

> "THE VAULT OF HORROR, THE CRYPT OF TERROR, THE HAUNT OF FEAR… if it slithered, slimed, crawled, killed, maimed, or devoured, it found a home in the pages of these books. No idea was too twisted, no image too terrifying for Gaines' Ghouls to illustrate for a white-knuckled public. "O. Henry"-style twist endings abounded: a baseball player who killed a rival was himself killed and his body parts used to play a midnight ball game. In another, a dutiful wife found that her husband, the butcher, had sold tainted meat that had accidentally killed their son. Come the next morning, his remains are proudly displayed in the meat case, while she stands glassy-eyed behind the counter." (Petty, 2006)

Then, along with the technological advancements, science fiction started gaining popularity as well. Petty divides it into: weird science, weird fantasy and incredible science fiction, saying: "Rockets, spacemen, and a plethora of weird aliens populated these magazines, with all the promise of the newly-born Atomic Age." (Petty, 2006)

We see that comics used to be a mirror of society, dealing with ideas that concerned or enthused people at the time of each particular "age", but what do comics represent today? One article states the following:

> "In this postmodern age, where we have few role models, blurred guidelines, and an ever-quickening erosion of morality, there aren't many places to turn for stories filled with self-sacrifice, high standards, and life lessons, especially in the secular realm. Comic books are one of our last sources of heroes and values." (Joe Mac, 2000)

In other words, older comics, and even newer ones, serve as lessons of morality in a world that is losing its values. The author of the article also considers that "comic books have become our mythology, constantly rewritten and updated, a metaphysical mirror held up to our societal norms every month." (Joe Mac, 2000), thus their readers being able to find themselves in the characters.

1.3 Manhwa

The term Manhwa (만화), the Korean word for "comics", is used nowadays in South Korea in reference to comic books, webtoons , and animation cartoons, but in the past the term used to refer only to what we call "comics", and what McCloud describes as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (2003). The origin of the word can be traced back to the Chinese 18th century term Manhua (漫画), which can be translated into "impromptu sketch" (Petersen, 2011). The Koreans not only borrowed the term, but also the practice of combining text and drawing from the Chinese, China being the first country in East Asia to have used this medium as a means of storytelling. Many scholars seem to believe that the term "manhwa" actually comes from the Japanese "manga", like Lim who says that "The term manhwa is known to originate from a Japanese word: manga" (2012), or Peter Borbely who claims that "It is a coined term invented by the woodblock (ukiyo-e) artist Katsushika Hokusai in 1814, which could be literally translated as "whimsical sketches"" (Borbely, 2014). In fact, the Japanese too have borrowed this word from Chinese, what is different however is the use of a simplified character for the word "picture" or "sketch". The confusion might come from the fact that Korean Manhwa are quite similar to Manga, as far as the drawing technique is concerned. We also believe that the two scholars mentioned took into consideration Korea's colonial period as well, when Japanese comics have been indeed enforced, in a way, to the Korean public, all Korean forms of literature going through censorship during those times.

In order to outline the meaning of manhwa, Lim also cites the definitions provided by a Korean dictionary: "Minjung Essence Korean Dictionary defines manhwa as (1) "An illustration that describes a story in a concise and humorous way (with insertion of conversations)"; (2) "An illustration that is drawn randomly"; (3) "An exaggerated or simplified illustration that satirizes or criticizes the life and the society" (Lim, 2012). In the West, the term only refers to an "Illustrated narrative of Korean origin" (Torres Simon, 2012).

Talking about the origins of comics in Korea, Torres Simon (2012) also noticed that the relation between calligraphy and drawing could be considered a predecessor of manhwa, Koreans approaching a sort of symbiosis of text and drawing in their art, also considering that "a picture is a poem without words". The same author gives us the names of the three manhwa who are believed to be the first of their kind: Bomyeongsipudo 보명십우도, a series of 10 narrated illustrations dating from the Goguryeo era; Samganghengsildo 삼강행실도, a Buddhist book with illustrated fables; and Euiudo 의우도, a text from the 18th century, but she considers that it is in the 19th century that manhwa as we know it today appeared, with the first modern manhwa Saphwa, by Lee Do-Yeong.

As far as the themes that these manhwa approached are concerned, they are too taken out of the country's political, economic, social and religious contexts, Bomyeongsipudo shows a monk in search of the truth (Torres Simon, 2012) in a time when Buddhism was introduced in the peninsula; Samganghengsildo presents a series of

moral principles, again Buddhist, and Euiudo tells the story of a faithful cow. This is in fact the reality of a predominantly rural and extremely religious Korean society of those times, before the Japanese occupation. After the Japanese entered and occupied the peninsula, the manhwa Saphwa appeared, in which its author draws upon the resistance of the Korean village, criticizing the Japanese. Not long afterwards, a censorship is installed, in order to evade any kind of political satire. Then, after the end of the Japanese occupation, brought by the end of the Second World War, Torres Simon (2012) notices the appearance of the war comic, genre that we saw was popular in England as well, but during WW2. In Korea's case, which now became South Korea, after the division of the peninsula, the war comic appeared as a reaction to the Korean War (1950-53), period in which comics were used as a means of propaganda by both sides (North and South), and which glorified the values of the soldiers. Rifas says that: "During the Korean War, thousands of war comic book stories were published. Many focused on battle as an initiation to manhood or as a small-scale drama that showed a violent victory of righteousness over evil." (Rifas, 2017) Also during this time, another type of manhwa appears, which is aimed at a younger audience, and which is intended as a means of relaxation and entertainment. After the war, we notice the appearance of the so called *ttakji manhwa* (딱지만화), comic magazine of about 20 pages, which told stories set in foreign countries. Torres Simon considers that it is in this time that manhwa finally adopts the contemporary form with panels and balloons (Torres Simon, 2012). Here we would like to draw a short comparison to comics drawn in the West. Western comics functioned by the "left-to-right and top-to-bottom movement" principle, namely they would be read from the beginning of the book/magazine towards the end, from left to right and top to bottom, thus following the story line, and in order to be read "readers must be familiar with their conventions such as …movement, distortion, closure, continuous narrative, symbols and icons" (Lim, 2012). On the other hand, even though the aesthetics employed were similar: panels and balloons, manhwa sometimes adopts the Japanese style and is read from the end towards the beginning of the book/magazine, from the right side of the page to the left and top-to-bottom, although in the majority of cases it follows the Western style.

Torres Simon also makes a classification of the themes approached by manhwa starting with the 60s, mentioning the adult comics, called *myeongrang*, fantasy comics, feminine comics, historical comics, and comics for children, the latter two being the most popular. The same author says, regarding the plots and themes tackled by the manhwa, that any narrative reflects to a certain extent a socio-cultural situation and, despite the formal similarities between Korea and Japan, its close geographical situation does not prevent a substantial variation in cultural expectations, social relations and the historical vision that is reflected in arguments, turns and characters.(Torres Simon, 2012). Thus, Korean stories have a tendency towards tragedy. For example, it is not unusual that the main character suffers a series of misfortunes without ever reaching a happy ending. Even though, on some occasions, the tragic outcomes are used to surprise

the reader, they are in fact part of the collective feeling of "han", a felling found only in Korean tradition.

We are able to notice a prevalence of historical themes in manhwa, and the fact that the previously mentioned historical events have left a mark on Korean culture and on the society in general, as the historical events that took place in the Western world have as well. Choi says about this the following:

> "No nation is without the trauma of history, especially when we reflect back on the long and violent twentieth century. Korea, following a path not too dissimilar from that of many newly independent former colonies, has endured a violent history from its inception until this day. South Korea, in particular, has gone through a remarkable transition from a poverty- stricken war- ravaged former colony to a democratic nation that boasts anywhere from the tenth to the thirteenth largest economy in the global era. Despite such a dazzling accomplishment, post-colonial South Koreans have been deeply injured by severe historical trauma." (Choi, 2021)

He continues to recount the post-war, post-colonial period in South Korean history, a period which has also left a mark on people's collective consciousness:

> "South Korean society itself bears the trauma of state violence against its own people perpetrated from its inception and throughout most of the country's seventy- year post-colonial history: the tyranny of authoritarian rule and the relentless brutal suppression of popular movements demanding democracy that resulted in a series of civilian deaths, culminating in the suppressing of the Kwangju Uprising in 1980, and which ended only with the establishment of the civilian government in 1993." (Choi, 2021)

In recent times, however, beside the classification mentioned above, and the themes that dominated the genre during a certain period of its existence, manhwa started to approach a larger variety of themes and there are many new genres that should be mentioned:

> "Manhwa consists of various genres to meet the interests of this large range of readers. The Korea Manhwa Archive classifies manhwa into 23 genres – science fiction (SF), horror, drama, chivalry, adult/sexual, sport, action, alternative, illustrative, comic, fantasy, school, fight, military/war, romance, historical play, sunjeong (girls'), yaoi , children, essaytoon cartoon, exorcism, educational (2009). Generally, a manhwa's genre depends very much on its audience (Cho, 2007, p. 9). For example, sunjeong manhwa and yaoi manhwa have been described as "highly gendered" (Noh, 2008, p. 5) media – most of their readers are girls and both help their reader find "a world suited to her own identity" through consumption (Thorn, as cited in Noh, 2008, p. 5)." (Lim,2012)

Lim mentions in his classification the educational manhwa as well, a genre characteristic to Korea, which were made popular by the "education fever", which he describes as "a special term for indicating this "national obsession" with education in Korea"(Lim,2012)

Thus, regarding the plots and themes tackled by both Wester comics and manhwa, we could say that we indeed notice that narratives reflect to a certain extent a socio-cultural situation, be it the issue of immigration or trauma cause by the war (be it

WW2 or the Korean War) or by unrequired control of colonisation. Despite any formal dissimilarities between The Western world and Korea, and despite their distant geographical situation, in this case, we still notice substantial similarities in cultural expectations, social relations and the historical vision that is reflected in arguments, turns and characters in what we call “comics”. The theme of war is a prevalent one in both comic books and manhwa, quite possibly because, through the nature of this literary form of reinforcing cultural ideals and ideas, both writers and readers found a way of coping with traumatic events that invaded societies, cultures and the collective consciousness.

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