

# Knowledge as Play: Comics by Japanese Modern Literature

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Received: July 21, 2022 Accepted: September 13, 2022 Online Published: September 30, 2022

doi:10.5539/res.v14n4p1

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v14n4p1>

## Abstract

In the context of Japanese cultural postmodernism, the phenomenon of resuming literary masterpieces in comic book form appears as a juxtaposition with a specific purpose, resulting in a hybrid form which we would regard as *komiXLit*<sup>1</sup>. As part of a specific way of knowledge, we interpret *komiXLit* as an *alternative* model whose characteristic is that of the combination of two apparently contradicting terms: the “high” literature and the *manga* pop culture publication, a cultural move placed by the Japanese publishing houses under the *credo* “understanding literature through *manga*”. Using the illustrative example provided by the masterpiece authored by Yasunari Kawabata *Snow Country* (1935-1937/1948) and its *manga* version (2010), with drawings by Sakuko Utsugi, the present endeavour proposes a reading in which the *komiXLit* version is interpreted as an architectonic structure inspired by the former, in an attempt to identify the dominants of the textual poetics.

**Keywords:** *komiXLit*, postmodernism, *manga*, *junbungaku* (“pure, high” literature), literature as a game

*In recent years it is said that the one realm of intellectual activity which has been the sharpest decline is literature. To the younger generation that responds so sensitively to new cultural developments, literature no longer seems to be within their focus of attention. [...] I fear that this is an ominous phenomenon foreboding the total destruction of Japanese culture ...*

Kenzaburō Ōe, *Japan's Dual Identity: A Writer's Dilemma*

*Now we are living in the age of comics as air.*

Osamu Tezuka

In 2006, the Japanese literary market offered its readers a book in three volumes, bearing a title that was, at the very least, surprising: *NHK Reading Classical Literature in Manga* (*NHK manga de yomu koten*). The invitation to reading (*yomu*) classical (*koten*) Japanese literature in the comic books (*manga*) format had already been initiated by the public television station NHK at the end of the Shōwa Period (1926-1989) and the beginning of the Heisei Period (1989-2019), in a TV show with the same title. The authors of the volumes published at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century adapted, in an original manner, the initial televised dramatization. Thus, in this comic book design, the fundamental titles of the classical Japanese literature from the Heian Period (794-1185) were published, among which we must mention Sei Shōnagon (966-1025), with the diary *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*), which represents the contents of the first volume of the aforementioned series (author Kazuki Mendō, 2016), and Lady Murasaki (978-1014), with *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), which became the third volume of the series (authors Shōko Toba & Makoto Hosomura, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> We propose that the term *komiXLit* designate the cultural and social phenomenon of resuming the masterpieces of the Japanese literature in *manga* (*comics*) versions, as a self-sustainable category within the genre, meant to complete the already existing ones: *story manga*, *dramatic pictures*, *graphic novels*, *boys'comics*, *girls'comics*, *men's comics*, *ladies' comics*.

As a cultural move placed by the Japanese publishing houses under the *credo* “understanding literature through *manga*” (*manga de wakaru bungaku*), the phenomenon of readdressing the Japanese literature in *comic book* version (*komikkuhan*) gradually included other periods of the universal and Japanese literary history. The publication of the novels signed by the modern classics of world literature (Goethe, Feodor Dostoyevsky) and of Japanese literature (Sōseki Natsume (1867-1916), Ōgai Mori (1862-1922), Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927), Osamu Dazai (1909-1948), Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972) etc.) in comic book versions seemed to have become a natural gesture<sup>2</sup>. If traditional societies legitimised knowledge through narratives of the *great* hero or through the *great* legitimising stories (*grands récits*) (cf. Lyotard, 1993, 15), with *great* adventures and *great* purpose that references the origins, now, by defining knowledge as “formation et culture” (cf. Lyotard, 1993, 37), the *metanarratives* (*mâarécits*) characteristic to modernity legitimise knowledge not in the terms of the past, but in those of the future. However, the “either... or...” logic of modernism later gives way to the more flexible “both... and...” logic of postmodernism and postmodern knowledge experiences the crisis of the *meta-stories* (see Lyotard, 1993, 15-16), when the narrative function is dispersed into a plethora of narrative linguistic elements, as well as denotative elements, each bearing *sui-generis* pragmatic valences. Therefore, in consumerist-capitalist Japan, which has had a spectacular technological and industrial development, the current postmodernism can be characterised by a multitude of heterogeneous and local “little stories”, considering the fact that the contemporary younger generation is increasingly seen as an apathetic and superficial one who, in the search of a *past future* time, seems to denounce the end of the *metanarratives* that promoted a narrative and scientific knowledge. By replacing these *metanarratives* with the game, in a type of local undertaking, in which knowledge could be approached as a game, the Japanese younger generation seems to have reclaimed its *meta-mass age* (see Ivy, 1989, 33-34), which exploits the exchange of borders between serious knowledge and literature consumption in the form of a game: “Meta-mass maintains that Japanese culture today no longer exhibits the vertical cleavages of the past – the distinction between high culture and mass culture, dominant culture and subculture, no longer apply.” (Ivy, 1989, 35).

Moreover, in this era, knowledge derives from information, thus becoming similar to a game, since it is inseparable from its representation as a *commodity*: “sign and commodity fuse in an almost perfect representation of the larger symbolic economy.” (Ivy, 1989, 36) Based on *commodity culture* (Schodt, 1996, 36), the Japanese postmodernism seeks new forms of presentation, both for a new form of delight and for the multiplication and proliferation of language games, thus making way for an *interplay* between technology, media and culture. As such, in the consumerist society, books are *consumed* like any other product of entertainment; books are bought, they delight (or not), they are thrown away and forgotten: “While more and more people are getting bored with printed words, literature has been redefined as a serious industry and a form of entertainment [...]” (Miyoshi, 1989, 156)

Mediated by books, newspapers, television and the internet, knowledge today integrates images more and more. And the movement towards this new format brings about a tendency of reading diffusively, partially, quickly, and of preferring the *mythogram* (see Leroi-Gourhan, 1983, 230-231) in the form of illustrations that are once again starting to dominate reading, with an increasingly more evident orientation towards the images presented by comic books as small tableaux that adhere to the text. The adaptability conditioned by the social environment can thus explain the unprecedented proliferation of the *manga* or comic book genre in Japanese post-industrial society.

Originally a humorous form of entertainment, addressed especially to young people, the *manga* format, as a means of expression located somewhere between short story, movie and television, has gained today such an impressive social status that the statistics lead towards the recognition (see Schodt, 1996, 28-29) of this *pop culture* phenomenon as a true genre industry (cf. Gravett, 2004, 24). According to popular opinion, in contemporary Japan, *manga* (*comics*) publications, which became a symbol of cultural imperialism, are one of the most efficient ways of earning a mass audience and, if need be of influencing the public opinion. As long as understanding contemporary Japan appears to be progressively connected to the role played by the *manga* market as “cultural commons” (see Berndt, 2012, 126-127) in society, its growing influence on the more “serious” literature and arts seems inevitable: “The Japanese have developed comics into such a powerful mass literature that it can stand up against the seemingly unstoppable dominance of television and movies.” (Gravett, 2004, 12)

Literally, the word *manga*, which, throughout the years, received different meanings, has been used in Japan for over 200 years (cf. Matsuba, 2019, 278) and it is used today with the sense of “spontaneous meaningless drawings” or

<sup>2</sup> The jacket of the volume (Hideko Anno, 2014) *Manga de wakaru nihon bungaku* [*Understanding Japanese literature through manga*] from 2014 (Tokyo: Ikeda shoten), for instance, openly pleads for the reading of modern literature through the *manga* format: *40 works, which should be read by the Japanese people today. Sōseki, Dazai, Akutagawa. Learn from the literature giants that lived the agitation of the epoch! [Ima, nihonjin ga yomu beki kindai bungaku 40 sakuhin. Sōseki, Dazai, Akutagawa Gekidō no jidai o ikita bungōtachi ni manabe].*

“pictures unbound or pictures run riot” (see Coolidge Rousmaniere & Matsuba (eds.), 2019, 22) that compile comic books. In order to outline the history of the term, two directions need to be followed: one, connected to this hybrid genre’s means of expression, as a monochromatic art that combines a narrative content through sequential storytelling, and the second, connected to the first use of the term *per se*. The East Asian monochromatic art is rooted in an ideographic writing that, through calligraphy, privileged the use of the brush and favoured the tendency of transforming the natural elements into signs, since the black and white painting has always been considered the place that configures the network of *vital breaths* (cf. Cheng, 1991, 76) which, through the unique, instantaneous and rhythmic brushstrokes, lead to a complete art. As Buddhist forms of popular pictorial storytelling, the scroll of drawings placed sequentially in order to depict legends, battles or day- to-day events, entitled *Chōjū jinbutsu giga*, or *Animal Scrolls*, is a good example of monochromatic art combined with the 12<sup>th</sup> century sequential storytelling, said to have been made by a Buddhist priest Sōjō Toba (1053-1140). Using satire at the expense of the clergy and the nobility, through this six-metre-long scroll, the priest-artist Toba ridicules his brethren by transforming them into mice, monkeys, foxes and toads. Furthermore, since the scroll is opened horizontally, from right to left, each time it is unrolled it creates, for the participating viewers, the miracle of *untying* the past (Cheng, 1991, 107), making them relive its rhythm. This view and this reading in a flowing manner survived in *manga* as well (cf. Gravett, 2004, 18). The aforementioned type of scroll (*emakimono*) was followed by two other types of entertaining picture books in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of which were called *Toba-e* (*Toba pictures*), whilst the others *kibyōshi*, or *yellow-jacket books*. Due to their mass production in the cities of Osaka and Edo (today’s Tokyo) through woodblock printing, they are considered to be the world’s first comic books (see Schodt, 1996, 21-22).

The term *manga* was used for the first time in 1814 by the *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the *floating world*) artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), who inscribed it on the *Hokusai manga* series (1814-78), referring to sketches drawn together in an indiscriminate, random and spontaneous manner (cf. Schodt, 1996, 34). The *Hokusai manga* volumes became so popular that the term started to be used, at that time, to mean “drawing manuals” (Matsuba, 2019, 278) or “unself-conscious sketches” (cf. Gravett, 2004, 21), thus showing that the artist had played with exaggeration and caricature. Later, the *manga* suffix was added to the book titles published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to indicate the fact that the volume contained handmade drawings. After Hokusai’s death, the *ukiyo-e* (woodblock) artist Kunisada Utagawa (1785-1865) used the term in the title of a printed series *Toyokuni manga zue*, which contained portraits of *kabuki* actors or pictorial representations of folktale heroes, and Yoshitoshi Tsukioka (1839-1892) published a series entitled *Yoshitoshi manga*, which contained scenes from classical tales, historical chronicles or stories (see Matsuba, 2019, 281). Because the *ukiyo-e* artists were, in 1842, by the authority of the samurai, forbidden from drawing portraits of *kabuki* actors, the aforementioned artists were joined by Kuniyoshi Utagawa (1797-1861), who transformed the portraits of the celebrities of that time into graffiti (cf. Clark, 2019, 252). *Manga* then signified a miscellany, a random selection of randomly chosen subjects, gathered into a single volume. Later, the term *manga* was used to reference caricatures or traditional humorous-satirical paintings and, in the pop-culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it represented visual storytelling. The term with the meaning it bears today has been used as such only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Written in ideograms, the word *manga* is comprised of 漫 [*man*], its primary meaning being that of “incoherent, wandering” (Karatani, 1982, 346) and 画 [*ga*], meaning “drawn line, painting” (Karatani, 1982, 73). The term covers several variations of meaning but, in a more technical sense, in contemporary times *manga* means “caricature”, “cartoon”, “comic strip” and “comic book”, all of which actually reference drawings (not photographs), accompanied by text, panels read sequentially from right to left, from the top down:

“It is difficult to provide a single definition for the Japanese term ‘manga’. There are particular features common to many *manga*: pages comprising a series of framed panels (*koma*) in which image and text are combined; speech bubbles (*fukidashi*); signs and symbols used to represent action and emotion (*manpu*) and monochrome drawing in black and white”. (Okeda, 2019, 272)

By using the principle of maximised economy, in an attempt to imprint depth and speed through lines and shadows, the *manga* technique offers subtle emotions with minimal effort, incorporating different perspectives and visual effects, known as cinematic techniques (cf. Schodt, 1996, 29) that result in the assertion of a fresh creativity and an unconscious freedom. As a true mass medium expression (Schodt, 1996, 275), through a language similar to that of the streets, transformed into a continuous source of new expressions, the *manga* genre enjoys in Japan a popularity that has no equivalent in the West, although it could be understood through its similarity with the Occidental film industry or entertainment industry: “Japan is the first nation to give the ‘comic book’ format such legitimacy and to test its potential on such a grand scale.” (Schodt, 1996, 32)

In cultural postmodernism, the phenomenon of readdressing literary masterpieces through comic book format in the Japanese culture seems to be a juxtaposition with a specific purpose, a combinatorial activity that results in a hybrid

form which we would regard as *komiXLit*<sup>3</sup>. There are different types of manga, with different intrigues and styles, such as *story manga*, *dramatic pictures*, *graphic novels*, *boys'comics*, *girls'comics*, *men's comics*, *ladies' comics*, addressed to readers of all ages, belonging to different social strata, a typology that does not, however, include the canonical literary prose rewritten in comic book version. By considering the phenomenon to be an ongoing experiment which has already reached such a scale that it cannot be ignored, we propose the term *komiXLit* to designate a self-contained category within the genre, whose longevity no longer seems to be up for debate. It is acknowledged that postmodernism is characterised by *playfulness*, *gaming*, *spectacle*, *tentativeness*, *alterity*, *reproduction* and *pastiche*, offered as a guide for the new era; by avoiding any form of massing, these terms aim to promote *dispersal*. However, as any negation implicitly contains the affirmance of what is negated, a *playful-serious* attitude can no longer be considered merely a game. And *mangadō* (see Bernabe, 2006, 10)<sup>4</sup> or *the way of manga* seems to join the other *ways* of the Japanese tradition (*shodō*, 'the way of writing', *kadō*, 'the way of flowers', *sadō*, 'the way of tea', *bushido*, 'the way of the warrior') as a means of ensuring the survival of the tradition within tradition, *komiXLit* thus pleading in the name of and for a widely accessible "high" literature. However, the same *mangadō* foreshadows, in a parallel sense, the interpretation of literature as a commercial transaction and of the reader as a potential consumer.

In a context in which postmodernism would be defined as a state of mind and a mental structure, as a worldview and a certain type of writing, *komiXLit* would identify society's "new sensibility", which abolishes the distinction between "high art" and "mass culture" and promotes a transition from the elitist culture to a popular one. The phenomenon debuted in 1953, through the *manga* adaptation of the novels *Faust* (Goethe) and *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoyevsky) by Osamu Tezuka (1928-89), the one called the "God of Comics" (Onoda Power, 2009, 3), without whom the *manga* explosion after the war would have been inconceivable (cf. Gravett, 2004, 24). Moreover, by interpreting postmodernism not first and foremost as a specific category for certain particular cultural discourses (literature, architecture, painting, etc.), but as an epistemic category that determines and influences existing discourses, the *komiXLit* postmodern phenomenon gains its ability to formulate and exemplify new, at least arguable intuitions. If one of the characteristics of postmodernity is the ability to juxtapose polar oppositions, in Japan it seems to be that much more obvious than in any other part of the world, given that contemporary postmodern society accepts, as self-evident, the proximity of the past and of the present, the coexistence of Eastern and Western mentalities, the existence of high culture in close vicinity of pop culture, etc. (cf. Wolfe, 1989, 215). Furthermore, since there are no control "codes" of postmodernism, *komiXLit*, as a reiterative literary phenomenon, can become a new form of understanding the Japanese postmodern condition and it can thus be included in the set of the sociological and textual manifestations of the moment. Undoubtedly, the distrust of the role played by *metanarratives* led to the emergence, in the Japanese culture, of certain hybrid formats, like *komiXLit*, which legitimise knowledge (*chi*) in terms of a *past future*: "There is a parallel between the new academic who has turned *chi* [knowledge] into a commodity and who mediates between the university and the masses, and the copywriter who mediates between the capitalist and the consumer." (Ivy, 1989, 33)

However, the tendency is by no means singular, and the desire for a new form of (re)presentation through comics gained more and more ground in Japan, having been adopted not only by the advertisements of the tourism companies that used *manga infomercial* (Schodt, 1996, 295), but also, perhaps paradoxically, by the traditional arts. From the *how-to* manuals for the economic or political explanations, to the user manuals for the publications that presented the art of calligraphy, everything seemed to feel the need for a new (self)representation, and each field turned to the *manga* format. In 2005, for instance, the volume entitled *Manga Sho no rekishi to meisaku tehon* (*Manga – The History of Calligraphy and Illustrative Masterpieces*) was published, which was then reprinted in a revised and expanded edition entitled *Manga Sho Ōgonjidai to meisakutehon* (*Manga – The Golden Age of Calligraphy and Illustrative Masterpieces*), signed by Uozumi Kazuki and Kurita Miyoko. The books addressed the readers who wished to find out more about the art of calligraphy and its history in pleasant, unchallenging ways, receiving information through the comic book format. The "*manga* revolution", which aimed to eliminate routine, rigidity and perhaps even boredom,

<sup>3</sup> The combination to which the term *komiXLit* refers resides in the paronymic and scriptural play between the English "comics" and the Japanese "komikkuhan" ("comic book"), together with the English "literature"; the capital letters "XL" (which represent the end of the first word, in a modernised transcription of a shortened message (*komix*) and the letter "L", from "literature) suggest a reference to a resumed version of the *great literature* (*XL*).

<sup>4</sup> Flipping through a 2003 issue of the magazine *Niigata manga dō* (*The Manga Way in Niigata*) of the Nippo Information Center, which presented the *manga* creations of the authors born in that respective prefecture, the reader could recognize the character Chāmī (pp. 22-25), created by Igarashi Kaoru. Chāmī, who is of a middle school age, upon being scolded by her parents for reading *manga* again, explains that only the simple reading gives her a better state of mind and that she feels revitalized (*Manga wa nē yomu dake de genki ni nattari kandō shitari ...*) and even encouraged (*Itsu date hagemashite kureru*), so that, with no hesitation, she calls the comic book volume "My Bible" (*Atashi no Baiburu nan da kara!*).

facilitated the presence not only of the Japanese politics in the context of the global political traditions, but also of the Japanese language textbooks<sup>5</sup> for foreigners in front of a wider public, through the *manga* graphic art. Discovering, learning and knowing, in postmodern times, seem to unidirectionally guide generations of all ages to the knowledge gained through playing for pleasure. Moreover, if the contemporary times impose “la mercantilisation du savoir” (Lyotard, 1993, 15), in the Japanese society, the debate present in both the academic and the media discourse (see Ivy, 1989, 34) shows that the opposition between those who produce the information and those who receive it is no longer useful, as long as the initiative seems to have transitioned from the *upstream* to the *downstream*.

Accepting that there is a sensibility of each epoch and interpreting knowledge as an issue of style, the Japanese society is compelled to take into consideration knowledge as a game (*asobi*), giving way for pop culture to intervene as a technique of knowledge and of promoting knowledge. If knowledge is always produced so as to be sold, it is and always will be consumed and exploited in new productions or, in other words, in both cases, in order to be *changed* into the “nodes” imposed by the texture of the postmodern condition; society can and must encourage the novelty of unexpected “moves”, if this is what gives the system an added “performativité” (see Lyotard, 1993, 14-32) through informational richness and easily accessible decoding. *KomiXLit* thus became a good example of the self-reflection of literature on its own condition in a reality which, by abolishing the hierarchic model of culture, transformed into a mosaic of styles. As a current interpretation of consumerism, *komiXLit* reveals the postmodern stance of entertaining consumers in capitalist society through a literature that has been transformed into the object of desire and pleasure. In Japan, this liberation of the desire for knowledge as game and as pleasure reflects a somewhat radical decision in the relation between the traditional education system, which is rather strict, and the demands of the consumer market. *KomiXLit*, subsuming the two poles of post-industrial society, surpasses the conflict, and the “high” literature is read as a form of entertainment in comic book format. By opting for renewal, postmodernism seems to be part of a constructive dialogue on reinterpreting the past, so the moment of a new form of knowledge can thus explain the emergence of the *komiXLit* format, as artefact texts and reassessments consumed by a *meta-mass*. In an increasingly more pronounced tendency of exteriorizing knowledge, the Japanese society *recycles* its literature; the *komiXLit* format is seen as a new means of representation, but also as a form of advertising the great (“pure”) literature. The continuous reconstruction of everything in postmodern *high-tech* Japan thus receives a justification, *komiXLit* becomes the channel for transmitting the narrative knowledge subjected to a set of rules established by pragmatism: a *certain* way of telling, a *certain* way of doing, a *certain* way of reading, imposed by the rhythm of the new narrative format. As an instrument of knowledge, the format does not promote a meaning, but rather it builds a signification.

Interpreted as a society of “showmanship”, subjected to the continuous effects of “simulation” and “seduction”, in which the cultural present wanders further and further from the major “modern” trends of thought and imagination, in Japanese postmodernism, the principle of the *plurality* of formal and axiomatic systems is inevitably imposed, replacing a dominant metalanguage. As a change of tone in society’s image, which requires a serious reassessment of the alternatives at hand, *komiXLit* suggests the re-visitation and revision of the literary past from an angle that legitimises a certain poetics and a certain interpretation or, in other words, an interpretive approach that is “consciously” dialogical. This way, the literary past is not considered a repository of dead and outdated forms, but a “dialogical” space of understanding and self-understanding. Among the varied practices of knowledge, Japanese postmodernism seems to impose a specific model, which requires its “legitimation”. As an alternative model, *komiXLit* identifies through a

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<sup>5</sup> Marc Bernabe, for instance, published, in 2004, a Japanese language textbook entitled *Japanese Mangaland. Learning the Basics*, reedited in 2006. As the author of the *Preface* to the second edition confesses, the textbook was originally a compilation of the Japanese language lessons offered by a journal specialized in *manga* and *anime* (Japanese cartoons), for three years, beginning in 1998. The openly stated purpose of the journal was the desire to teach the Japanese language in an “enjoyable way, using examples which had been taken from Japanese *manga* to make the study as pleasant as possible”, regardless of how... unusual such an idea may have sounded: “which sounded as crazy as a Japanese course using *manga*” (Bernabe, 2006, 5). The legitimization of such a Japanese language course was also given by Yoshito Usui, the author of the comic books *Crayon Shin-chan*, in the preface *Greetings from Yoshito Usui*, from the aforementioned textbook. He mentioned the pleasant memory of the smiling faces of the foreign readers who were interested in the Japanese language and culture, who desperately wanted, after their encounter with the Japanese comic books and animations, to visit Japan (“been dying to come to Japan”). Of course, the Japanese language textbook in this format is very different from a traditional one, which somewhat makes it an introduction to the “*manga* language”. Thus, lesson 7, which teaches the personal pronoun, begins by inventorying the forms of the first-person personal pronouns with the usual example: *watakushi*, a very formal “I”, and continues with *watashi* (the formal level), *boku* (the informal level, male), *atashi* (the informal level, female), *ore* (vulgar), but the list of first person personal pronouns is also completed by other forms, used by the *manga* characters: *washi* (an “I” used by men over 50 years old), *asshi* (used by men in very informal or vulgar situations), *oira* (used by country men), *sessha* (used by the old samurai, in movies or in comic books etc.). (Bernabe, 2006, 58-60)

feature that emphasises its ability to unify, thus managing to the limit, to integrate two apparently contradictory terms: “high” literature and comics. Given that literature seemed to have become a motionless notion, its dynamic restoration as a fresh opportunity resided, among other things, in its resumption in comics versions. Undoubtedly, given that the audience’s seduction is just as important as their education, the *manga* genre, in its desire for visibility, imposed a popular style whose characteristics could considerably reduce the distance between the text and the reader. Moreover, if, for the general public, the category compiled of pop art products is more charming, since their value and quality were set up in such a way that they would indeed be tempting, promoting an aesthetic code of a new humanism associated with the principle of pleasure and seduction (see Petrescu, 1996, 134), *manga*, initially as a marginal cultural form, or a cultural form of opposition, now combined with the “pure, high” literature, diversifies the popular style destined for the market. Without producing innovation for innovation’s sake, but with the obvious intent to stimulate and intensify desire and pleasure by codification and simplification, - the imperious aspiration of consumerist capitalism -, the new literary form stimulates its own market.

This context of the pop culture “revolution” also includes the editorial emergence, in a *manga* key, of the novel *Yuki guni* (1935-1937/ 1948) [*Snow Country*], Yasunari Kawabata’s masterpiece, with illustrations by Sakuko Utsugi, in 2010, resumed in an electronic version in 2016. The novel *Snow Country*, for which Yasunari Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968, is “interpreted” by an advanced industrial society in a hybrid form, as a portal to the “pure” literature for different generations. *Snow Country* is thus twice coded, in the sense that it concurrently tries to speak on two different planes that simultaneously address the two categories of potential readers: the elite and the mass. An adequate understanding of this text can only be achieved by decoding a language using its own rules and structures, based on the possible meeting between the elitist culture and the popular culture. Nevertheless perhaps similar to the “incredible pains” (see Tanizaki, 2001, 5) felt by a traditionalist architect who, trying to design a house in pure Japanese style, is compelled to “harmonise” the austerity of the Japanese rooms with the electrical wires and the gas and water pipes, *Snow Country*, in the *komiXLit* version, can confuse pretentious readers at first, compelling them to reassess and surpass their own prejudices.

The “pure, high” literature or *junbungaku*, a concept that can be translated in English as “sincere or polite literature” or, in French, “belles lettres”, is a term that today refers to the literature that is not *popular* or *mundane* (see Ōe, 1989, 192-193). Accepting the fact that modern Japanese literature emerged, together with the Meiji Restoration (1869-1912), with the purpose of creating a model of modern times, the postwar literature reached its highest level through the *junbungaku* type; the work of Yasunari Kawabata is an illustrative example in this sense. However, in the postmodern paradigm, *junbungaku* literature, in order to keep up with the consumerist momentum, is compelled to reinvent itself in a new light, without losing its aesthetic coordinates, which must remain or be dominant. In the context in which *junbungaku* literature seems to have lost its power of capturing the minds of young people who embrace pop culture products on a national level (see Ōe, 1989, 208), the *komiXLit* format manages to revitalise the reading desire in Japanese society: “Manga create the motivation to read. Manga are the hook that pulls people in and gets them to read” (Mitsuru Okazaki, apud Schodt, 1996, 297). This is probably due to the fact that the *manga* genre also accepts a new reading technique that is easy and unchallenging, that can even adapt to the permanently crowded means of transportation, or to the daily commute of several hours to Japanese people’s workplaces:

“The frenetic pace of daily rush hours on mass transit systems and bullet trains becomes less dehumanizing if you let yourself be transported simultaneously by the flow of *manga* stories’ imagery and emotions, their speech balloons and sound effects playing in your head. You can make one or more thick magazine or graphic novel last a whole trip; a chapter almost seems designated to fill exactly the time taken to travel from one subway station to the next.” (Gravett, 2004, 96)

Moreover, if *junbungaku* literature can be considered a distinctive and delineated entity, *komiXLit* would be something more malleable, with an open ending, leading towards an in-between set amongst the “high” or “great” cultural products and the “low” or “small” ones. Based on a reality inherited as a given, the *komiXLit* phenomenon built a strategic reaction to the present, since it seems that marginality became the adequate mouthpiece for post-industrial society. By avoiding an opposition between the *dominant* literature and the *marginal* (*manga* pop-culture), *komiXLit* helped the two categories intertwine into one. As an irrefutable proof, at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, the novel *Snow Country* is published in a *komiXLit* version, without necessarily requiring, at first, an answer to the question whether the phenomenon was actually the vulgarisation or the revitalisation of the “high”, “great” literature.

The Japanese prose of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is undoubtedly strongly connected to the name of Yasunari Kawabata. A seeker of the expression of the inexpressible, by combining linguistic simplicity with literary ambiguity, Yasunari Kawabata explored an area of the modern Japanese prose in an original and, apparently, unmatched way. He debuted in 1926 with the novel *The Dancing Girl of Izu* (*Izu no odoriko*), but his fame was brought by *Snow Country* (*Yuki guni*) [1935-1948]. The concept of “beauty” seemed to continue to be the main preoccupation of the Japanese writer after the end of World

War II as well, when he published the novels: *One Thousand Cranes (Senbazuru)* [1949-1952], *Sound of the Mountain (Yama no oto)* [1949-1954], *The House of the Sleeping Beauties (Nemureru bijo)* [1960-1961], *Koto or The Old Capital (Koto)* [1961-1962], *With Beauty and Sorrow (Utsukushisa to kanashimi to)* [1965]. Together with Yokomitsu Riichi (1898-1947), he is considered the founder of the literary movement called “neosensualism” (*shinkankakuha*). Yasunari Kawabata became part of the world literature history through a work that was unanimously perceived as “very Japanese”. In an attempt to rediscover the traditional feeling of “beauty” through narrative fiction, Yasunari Kawabata conducts a continuous search for a world of *purity* and *beauty*, trying to find the perfect expression for what Japanese aesthetics calls *mono no aware* (lit. ‘the pathos of things’) or ‘the beauty of simple and ephemeral things’.

Like any *shōsetsu* (‘novel’), *Snow Country* is a writing that comes to life in accordance with the models of its time, through publications of predetermined length in literary magazines, a type of “slow-motion” novel (cf. Hijiya-Kirschner, 1989, 46) that can be seen as a text built out of several short narrative sequences. When these units are gathered into a whole, in order to be published as an independent book, through this new reading, the author offers a new text, as was the case of the novel *Snow Country*, which had initially been published in several different magazines, throughout thirteen years, in the form of separate items considered autonomous. Thus, the novel’s chapters are viewed as relatively independent units and the fact that one unit succeeds or precedes another becomes clear only when everything is melted into a whole (see Hijiya-Kirschner, 1989, 47). Therefore, these sequences were not organised around an action and the rich, detailed descriptions are the ones that dominate these narrative texts as true word engravings, giving the impression that they are actually prose images.

As a diachronic palimpsest, as well as a score for two voices with a stereo effect in synchrony, *Snow Country – komiXLit* imposes a particular type of reading – required, on the one hand, by the original text, as a novel, and, on the other hand, by the form of expression offered by the *manga* comics; the *komiXLit* type of narrative form creates its own “language”, with a unique syntax. Moreover, given its characteristic *cinematic techniques*, the *manga* narration page can be read at a speed of 3.75 seconds (cf. Schodt, 1996, 26), thus allowing the reader to also opt for an unconventional read, such as stand-up reading (*tachiyomi*) in crowded means of public transport, or a read comparable with the act of eating snacks in *manga* cafés (*manga kissaten*), a type of *manga* libraries in which the clients can read their favourite volumes in private booths:

“Reading, eating, and consuming here become conflated – it’s all a matter of incorporating some thing, but incorporating it lightly, without undue investment. There is thus a complex emphasis on techniques of reading and textual relationships in the new academic discourse.” (Ivy, 1989, 31)

Interpreting the novel *Snow Country* in its *manga* version as an architectonic structure inspired by the original version, the specific reading applied to this literary text, exploiting the semantic and pragmatic interface of the two writings that are part of a unique intertextual dialogue, emphasises the connection and the separation of one text from the other through their vocabularies, through the use of deictics, or through the exploitation of anaphoric relations etc. Furthermore, the characters’ gestures must often fill in for the linguistic information that was omitted from the source-text, so that the monochromatic line of the drawing, similar to a camera, can draw the reader’s attention to the details of the characters or of the ambient, to the pauses and cliff-hangers, creating associations and emotions within the possible world.

The novel *Snow Country* has three main characters: a middle-aged amateur intellectual from Tokyo, named Shimamura, and two young women, Komako and Yōko, who live in a small thermal bath resort from Echigo, a region in northern Japan. The narration presents three of Shimamura’s visits to the area. The first visit, which lasted for three days, takes place on 21 May, when Komako, the *geisha* of the thermal resort whom Shimamura now meets, is nineteen years old. The second visit, with which the novel opens, is connected to the winter of the same year: Shimamura arrives on 8 December and stays for several weeks. The third and final visit occurs two years later, when Shimamura arrives in the resort at the beginning of fall and only leaves after the first snow. Shimamura is thus the centre of the novel (cf. Ueda, 1976, 73), the character through whom the reader enters the snow country, meeting the other two protagonists – fragile women, dreams turned onto themselves (cf. Karatani, 1989, 39), in an emotional nihilism enclosed in a mirror. The characters, together with a succinct description, are presented in *Snow Country – komiXLit* in accordance with the *manga* model, immediately after the title page, in the chapter *Character Profiles (Jinbutsushōkai)*, on pages 2 and 3. While familiarising himself with the profiles of the five heroes of the narration, the reader quickly finds out, from the medallions that accompany each panel-portrait, that Shimamura, with Caucasian features (which could be quite disconcerting, especially to the foreign reader), dressed traditionally, but wearing a Western hat and scarf, is a rich heir, interested in ballet and European dance, that Komako, in a luxurious *kimono* and holding the *shamisen*, had become a *geisha* in order to pay the bills for the treatment of Yukio’s illness (the son of the *shamisen* teacher), and that Yōko, wearing a modest *kimono*, is a girl who lives with Komako and has a beautiful voice.

In the original text, the detail regarding Yōko's voice appears only after Shimamura, while riding the train that was taking him to the snow country, in the scene with which the novel opens, hears Yōko speak. The sentence *Kanashii hodo utsukushii koe de atta*, literally translates to 'The voice was so beautiful that it struck one as sad' and, as opposed to the original, in the *komiXLit* version it was omitted from the beginning. Not following the original, it then appeared at the end, in the context of the agony of Yōko's death. Since the figurative is related to the senses, the game of combinations is, in the two texts, subjected to certain variable frequencies. As if to prepare the reader for the devastating and concise emotion of the ending, in the source-text, the deeply sensory description of Yōko's voice – which, through the vocal lyricism, associates the “beauty” with “sadness”, automatically triggering the subtle springs in the mechanism that constructs the deep meaning of the sentence – is transformed into a strangely repetitive syntagm that is almost narcotic and that can be found throughout the novel: (lit.) *Yōko's voice, so beautiful that it struck one as sad* (emphasis ours), *which seemed to come as an echo from somewhere in the snowy mountains, remained in Shimamura's ears (Yōko no kanashii hodo utsukushii koe wa, dokoka yuki no yama kara imanimo kodama shite kisōni, Shimamura no mim ini nokotte ita.)* (Kawabata, 1988, 74). By accepting the convention of the fact that the possible instruments of figurative behaviour can only be hearing, sight and body language, the *manga* adaptation, in its turn, embellishes the characters and makes use of deviations in rhythm and harmony, so as to facilitate the transition from one means of expression to the other. The *komiXLit* version, in which the figurative syntax becomes inseparable from the textual one, creates its own contexts in order to insert key-sentences from the original text. And, although readers do find the description of Yōko's profile medallion only in the final pages, in her final living moments, they can associate the character, in a type of interpretive conclusion, with a “visual voice” (Cohn, 2010,190) through which they experience the feeling of volatility, of exiting time, of death and nothingness. The identification attributes of each character remain, in the end, in the same form, the only difference being the affective version of their representation.

The theme of associating beauty with sadness was resumed by Yasunari Kawabata in his last published novel as well, entitled *Beauty and Sadness and. Utsukushisa*, meaning ‘beauty’, is, in the Japanese language, a noun derived from the adjective *utsukushii*, meaning ‘beautiful’. However, the Japanese language has another noun that uses the same Chinese character (美), read as “bi”, whose meaning is closer to the aesthetic ‘beauty’. It is interesting that Yasunari Kawabata, throughout his literary career, used all three lexemes containing the Chinese ideogram, with all the morphological values that existed in the language: as a noun derived from the adjective in the title of the novel published in 1965: *Beauty and Sadness (Utsukushisa* (emphasis ours) *to kanashimi to)*, as an adjective in the title of the speech held, in 1968, upon receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature: *Japan the Beautiful and Myself (Utsukushii* (emphasis ours) *Nihon no watashi)* (Kawabata, 1993), and as a noun version that bears an aesthetic load in the title of the speech held in 1969 at the University of Hawaii: *The Existence and Discovery of Beauty (Bi* (emphasis ours) *no sonzai to hakken)* (Kawabata, 1969).

Before the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), the standards for Japanese intellectuals were represented by the studies of the Chinese classics, although a reaction to this movement appeared fairly quickly, as well as a nationalist ideology whose prominent figure was Norinaga Motoori (1730-1801). The one who was later regarded as the most important scholar of “national studies” (*kokugaku*) tried to counterpose a “Japanese spirit” (*yamatogokoro*) to the “Chinese” (*karagokoro*) and “Indian” (*hotokegokoro*) ones by proposing the formula *mono no aware*, which symbolised the literary ideal of the first Japanese novel, *The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari)*, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, belonging to Lady Murasaki Shikibu: “The original definition of *aware* is the stirring up of the heart by all kinds of human feelings. This is why what should be felt deeply inside the human heart is called *mono no aware*”. (Norinaga, 2007, 184)

Kawabata also considered that pure beauty was perishable, fragile, and that it could be expressed precisely through *mono no aware* (literally ‘the motion of the soul towards things, the sadness of things’), which invokes the sadness released by the feeling of the passing towards the death of everything living, so that the passing of human beings through this world, for the Japanese writer, is loaded with the resignation in front of the Absolute, which cannot be opposed. However, the “sadness of things” is permanently accompanied by the individual's possible reaction to the quick perception of a season, a sound, a gesture, an image, a suggestion that is emphasized, by characteristic means, both in the original version of the novel *Snow Country* and in the *komiXLit* version.

The novel's opening sentence also stands out in a parallel reading. In the original text, the sentence that opens the novel is (lit.) *Passing through a long tunnel from the border, there was a snow country (Kunizakai no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni de atta.)*, but, in the *manga* version, it is placed only on the 7<sup>th</sup> page of the book (or the 3<sup>rd</sup> page from the actual beginning of the narration) and it “explains” an image depicting a train, seen as a whole, from afar, on the background of a winter mountain landscape, occupying the entire upper half of pages 6 and 7. In the *komiXLit* format, the narration opens with a page containing four panels: the first represents the frontal image of a locomotive partially overlapping a larger panel that tries to outline the interior of a train; the third panel depicts the exit of a tunnel, as it could be seen by a traveller sitting at the front of the train, and the final panel shows Shimamura sitting on a train bench,



looking at something that was taking place in front of him. Across the panels, the mimetic words *gatan goton gatan* and *zaah* are written, an onomatopoeic rendition of the movement of the train, the reader thus being helped to “hear” the “voice” of the train wheels. The appearance of the train in the first panel of the *komiXLit* novel facilitates the “reading” of the means of transportation as a grammatical subject, which clarifies what has passed through the tunnel, a fact that does not exist in the original Japanese sentence; a detail that radically changes the perspective on the scene. The original sentence seems to have been specifically designed to remain unclear, in order to incite an interpretation that pendulates between multiple hypotheses. Through the ambiguous opening sentence, the original text proposes a rapid change of scenes, of images; the train is not mentioned precisely because it is merely the instrument that facilitates the passage from a dark, tight space, to the vast and clear one that is the snow country. The images presented on the first pages of the *komiXLit* version, being focused on the moving “train”, interpreted as a possible grammatical subject, modify the interpretation of the novel by introducing an objective perspective (cf. Ikegami, 2007, 203-204). What is important now is no longer the change of location, but the statute of certain scenes in which the narrator and the protagonist seem to be clearly separated: the narrator is the observer of the protagonist sitting in a train that takes him through a tunnel and into a country covered in snow. In the original Japanese sentence, the subjective perspective is given precedence; the narrator seems to journey inside the same train as the novel’s protagonist, experiencing the same events and emotions. Due to the ambiguity characteristic to the Japanese language, in which the subject is not mentioned, this sentence can be read as a form of an inner monologue of the hero on the train (see Ikegami, 1989, 267). Moreover, the readers themselves can experience the illusion of sitting in the same compartment, sharing the rite of passage from darkness to the light with the hero, from a closed space to an open one. Furthermore, the lack of a clearly marked subject invites the readers to easily project themselves into the atmosphere created by the lines, thus being able to become characters in the novel. Consequently, the narrator is identified with the character and the reader, since the impersonal manner in which the novel opens interfuses them all in the text, and the story that begins can no longer be attributed to anyone in particular.

Naturally, the *manga* adaptation coexists fully-fledged with the original text, although it does not aim to be its exact figurative representation; by respecting a stylistic convention regarding the “high-context, low-content” (cf. Thomas, 2012, 45), the *komiXLit* version must be interpreted as an artistic form that gives primacy to the images before the text, imposing its own visual techniques connected to composition, panel structure, stylisation and decoration in transmitting the narration, so as to trigger intellectual and emotional responses. If the opening sentence of the original novel can, in the end, be interpreted as a separation of the self from the world, but, at the same time, as an attempt of reconciling (cf. Liman, 1971, 268) the exterior and the interior, the self and the world, the story that begins in *Snow Country – komiXLit* is dissolved into a flow of images, and the temporal continuity and the causal objectivity are replaced by an inner unity connected to the specialised rhetorical vocabulary of the visual language and to the syntax of a form adapted to the function.

In order for the *manga* version not to remain a merely illustrated substitute, it was given an ending that brings its own contribution to the “translation” of the original text into images. As a movie, which, in stylistic coherence, prepares its ending from the very first frame, the *manga* version proposes an ending that is parallel with the source-text, contextualising the three direct lines from the ending of the original novel, which are: the short cry (lit.) *Ah... (Aa...)* of Komako upon recognising Yōko’s body, falling from the flaming warehouse, the men’s scream (lit.) *Leave. Please leave (Doite. Doitechōdai)*, which disperses the crowd from the place where Yōko fell and, once again, Komako’s scream (lit.) *This girl lost her mind! She lost her mind! (Kono ko, ki ga chigau wa. Ki ga chigau wa.)*, while holding the inert Yōko, making her way through the crowd (see Kawabata, 1988, 156-157). In the source-text, the final emphasis is put on the contemplation of the Milky Way (Amanogawa), on the exit from time, experienced by Shimamura and Komako together. Through the fire at the silkworm warehouse and Yōko’s directly assisted death, they are compelled to brutally re-enter material time; in the final lines of the book, only Shimamura gazes back towards the Amanogawa, as a gesture of ending a prolonged meditation. In *Snow Country – komiXLit*, the three aforementioned dialogical sequences are developed throughout fifteen pages, thus somewhat changing the stylistic emphasis of the ending, which shifts from the stillness of Shimamura’s meditative contemplation to the loud dynamic of a fire witnessed by a lot of people. Moreover, Shimamura’s thoughts of love or gestures of tenderness towards Komako, which can be found here, are inexistent in the original text, just as the lines of dialogue between Komako and Yōko in the final moments of her life are absent from the original. This is the moment when the *manga* illustrator inserted, under the latter’s head, seen from behind, a bubble containing the detail in which the voice is described as being so beautiful that it struck one as sad (Kawabata & Utsugi, 2010, 209). In the original version, Yōko, the girl who has been so close to death, apparently unreal, outside time, is torn from the mirage of the dream that connected her to Shimamura through the short spasm of the fall, produced by the body’s crash against the hard ground; her death is instantaneous.

The silence of the Milky Way in the original novel suspends the antinomy between the real and the eternal, between the present time and the time of no time. In this meeting between Shimamura – the traveller between Echigo and Tokyo, between Komako and Yōko, between the real and the unreal –and the celestial body, there is an almost mystical experience (cf. Liman, 1971, 284), placed somewhere between delicate sensuality and spirituality, which is neither carnal, nor metaphysical, suggesting a type of “modern transfer” of nostalgia for the lost paradise. The fire scene at the end, as it is depicted on numerous successive panels in the *manga* version, follows a reversed movement, with Shimamura’s re-turn to reality. However, in spite of the fact that some of the lines are reversed, such as, for instance, Komako’s scream: *This girl lost her mind! She lost her mind!*, which, here, is attributed to Shimamura, referring to Komako, *Snow Country – komiXLit* returns, in the final bubble, to the original ending sentence: (lit.) *As he caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way cascaded down inside him with a roar (Me o ageru to saa to oto o tatete Amanogawa ga nagare ochite kita ...)* (Kawabata & Utsugi, 2010, 217). Just like the source-text, the *manga* version brings forth a cold Shimamura, who, like the eye of a camera, turns into a continuously moving mirror through which the cruel reality can liquefy, so that he can surpass the barrier of life and death, into the state of dreaming. Because of the technique of the flow of consciousness, not as the Western-type literature of association and memory, probing the psychological universe of infirmities, corruptions and alienations in the contemporary world, but in the Japanese manner of recognising the natural and the closeness to nature, the idea of closure in a literary text in the Japanese mentality is almost useless, since life continues to flow. The human beings enter this world empty-handed, but, in order to survive, they learn to control the surrounding environment, trying to adapt not only their senses spatially and temporally, but also their rational abilities of organising these senses (cf. Tsuruta, 1971, 264). Kawabata takes advantage of the dualities so as to eliminate them: Tokyo vs. the snow country, snow vs. fire, sky vs. earth, man vs. woman are all, in the end, immersed in the endless Milky Way. The distances change and the individual absorbed by the Milky Way is integrated in a process that dilutes reality (see Tsuruta, 1971, 262), so that the fusion of elements can occur: the fire melts the snow, Yōko dies, Komako loses her concreteness, obtained throughout the years, and Shimamura, initially refuged in the pleasure of the entertainment provided by music and dance, remains immersed in the contemplation of the *floating world*.

In the original text, the only relation the protagonist Shimamura has with reality is made through perception (*kankaku*), the only source of information regarding reality. The emphasis on sensorial perception, particularly visual perception, and the direct consequence of avoiding the rational discourse and the intellectual process (cf. Liman, 1971, 268) lead to an indirect interpretation of the event or of the character’s feature in a particular moment, which is similar to the cinematographic technique of commentary through the image. For Kawabata, however, this commentary is never too explicit or definitive, the visual sensation, the image, opens the path towards the interpretation of a complex meaning. An emotional experience and a universal sensibility connect the unconscious (or semi-conscious) emotion with a natural phenomenon. As a sensualist who surpassed his own limits of sensorial visceral experience, Kawabata seeks the tangible expression of what is intangible and invisible. The images appear to be illogical, impressionist and associative (cf. Liman, 1971, 271), serving the model of perception as a matrix image on an artistic level, thus favouring composition, a characteristic exploited to the maximum by the *manga* version of the novel. During the final visit to the snow country, in the original text, the death of the bugs in his room at the inn, as autumn is becoming colder and colder, provides Shimamura with an opportunity for prolonged meditation, in a room which he considers much too big a scene for the silent and drama-free death of those small lives (see Kawabata, 2008, 114-115). Shimamura’s inner world becomes increasingly more un-intelligible and it is thus difficult to understand why his mind continues to associate the dead insects in the room with his children in Tokyo. The protagonist’s meditation that explores, in a melancholic tone, the universe of the human soul, seems to be rather similar to a musical dissociation, in which the voice-character was extracted from pain into a state of calm; in an attempt to “exploit” suffering, he removes desperation. However, in the *manga* version, Shimamura’s entire meditation, originally several dozen lines long, is condensed into a single panel (see Kawabata & Utsugi 2010, 143), which partially depicts the right palm of a human hand; the fingers are facing upwards and the index finger, the only one shown in its entirety, seems to touch a corner of the wing of an insect crouched in death, all of its legs gathered together on the abdomen facing upwards. The panoramic panel is actually an obvious illustration of the combination between *to tell* and *to show* (Thomas, 2012, 58) in the *komiXLit* version: the drawing is traversed by the mimetic word *pototh*, which is an attempt to make the noise of a dead insect falling heard, the onomatopoeia thus receiving the function of projecting an image that must be heard. Since the page contains three other panels delineated by frames, the absence of an outline for the aforementioned panel very acutely creates the impression that it is actually the background for the others; this amounts to a suggestion of doubt and illusoriness attempted by the mind of the protagonist himself, the relation between the exterior truth and the inner sensation thus being strongly obscured. The binder between the panels and the words on the entire page seems to be given by the sound resonance of the mimicry *pototh*, which evades the oneiric ambient in a poetic solidity that confers unity to the image, removing the readers from the passivity of reading and triggering their empathy. The perceptual frame is, therefore, configured by

im-pression and ex-pression (cf. Liman, 1971, 270), which are almost interchangeable, in Kawabata's prose, with a strongly altered border between objective and subjective – his characters are loners interested in states of mind, in inner experiences and feelings, rather than in actions or facts, emphasised lyrically and impressionistically.

What somewhat confuses the Western reader in the case of the original novel is perhaps the lack of action, identity conflicts and clearly outlined individualities, which would, in the end, gain the awareness of the relation with the exterior, with reality. Through narrative panels and conversation bubbles and textual meaning transmitted through images, *Snow Country – komiXLit* attempts to encompass the already established particularity of the line drawing (*byōsen*), subordinating the text of the images in the panels, which, in their turn, are supported by sound or visual effects created by onomatopoeia (*giongo*) or by mimetic words (*giseigo* and *gitaigo*)<sup>6</sup> inserted in the image, whose effect is considerably increased through the quality of being part of the image and not words isolated in a bubble. The free coordination between verbal language and graphic representations is tangent: the hand has its own language, its expression related to the sight, and the face, with its language related to hearing, and, between the two, a halo given by the imagistic gesture that interprets the word or comments on the writing. Therefore, the image becomes a portal through which the reader enters the fictional universe created by Kawabata, in order to observe its visceral quality. The cinematic style of the illustrations, which increases the rhythm of the action, not only fills the gaps between the panels, but also activates the senses more acutely: sight, hearing, smell and touch; given that the time and the distances are compressed, they seem to more directly recover a strong emotional tension. The subjects of the action are captured by a network of motions from inside or outside their own body, whose shape is interpreted by their senses; the perception starts from the sight-hearing pair, since, for human beings, sight is exclusively exploratory. As a code of aesthetic emotions based on senses and as an intellectual image (cf. Leroi-Gourhan, 1983, 74), the drawing relates to the individual's dominant sense, and the visual aesthetics may lead both to purely intellectual images and to the complete interiorisation of the symbols. In *manga*, a format with no additional explanations (cf. Rakuten, apud Matsuba, 2019, 284), with little to no dialogue, the *byōsen* (*moving line*) from the *polymorphic*, *macro*, *mono* and *micro* panels (see Cohn, 2010, 197-198) becomes crucial to the modern visual story that creates the context of a connection of meaning between the text and the image. *Snow Country – komiXLit* is, in the end, the contemporary reception of the classic canon through the blend of two stylistic modes that make the re-writing of the narration possible. If the original text is a *type*, the *komiXLit* version becomes an *occurrence* (see Genette, 1999, 19) with a playfully deformed reference, a labyrinth of possibilities, with parallel times, all of which equal in rights to the fictional presentation that allows for the doubling or multiplication of the beginning, of the ending or of the narrated actions, favouring the passing from one dominant to another.

The *komiXLit* style, as an attribute of the text in which a complex variety of meanings and forms blends, is the environment created by the meeting of two different forms, in which the drawing is seen as a stimulation of the imagination for a statistical majority of the consumers who receive the emotional nourishment that is adequate to their assimilation needs and abilities. The pragmatic dimension, the most socialised peak of the literary practice, considering the conventions, practices and uses that evolve in time, is generously exploited. A *paratextual* element (Genette, 1987, 73) like the title, for instance, which is purely pragmatic, attempts to seduce the potential buyers by attracting them towards reading: the title, accompanied by the *komikkuhan* additional note (*comic book version*), will attract the “clients” and will make them buy the “product”, and the iconic practice will push them towards reading, guiding them there. The rich orchestration of effects resulting from the new multiple codification, accompanied by the socio-cultural factors of the reader response, calls for the reassessment of the classic dichotomy between “pure” literature and consumer literature, or between the works dedicated to elitist consumption and the ones for mass consumption, thus triggering the meeting between the aesthetic function and the pragmatic one.

Postmodernism leads to a new *chi*, or a new form of knowledge, in which the resumption of the “true” literature through the instrument offered by the pop culture manifests. The pessimistic conservatory readers could understand the *komiXLit* phenomenon as a bastardisation of the “high” literature”, while the more optimistic ones can see here an attempt of preserving or revitalising *junbungaku* literature as a form of relaxation. Given that Japanese society feels the need to playfully transform an intellectual product into that of desire and, perhaps, pleasure, a new discourse on knowledge inevitably emerges: knowledge for its own sake no longer primes, knowledge encapsulated into a scholarly book, but rather knowledge as an instrument of pleasure, which also includes, we believe, the *komiXLit* fictional prose format. Does *literature as a game* or *bungaku asobi* seem to be a partial solution, or a permanent solution, perhaps, to a “problematic given” (see Ivy, 1989, 25) in contemporary Japan, connected to the dissemination and consumption of knowledge of any kind? The thesaurus dictionary of the Japanese language defines the verb *asobu* (“to play, to have

<sup>6</sup> The *phonomimes* (*giseigo*) or *phenomimes* (*gitaigo*) are phonetic representations of the phenomena perceptible through the non-auditory senses or of certain human psychological states.

fun') as *the act of liberating the mind and the body from the daily life and of giving oneself to another reality* (*Nichijōtekina seikatsu kara shinshin o kaihōshi, bettenchi ni mi o yudaneru i.*) (Shinmura, 1991, 49). Etymologically, the verb *asobu* originates from references to the entertainment shows that accompanied religious rituals, like music and dance (cf. Thomas, 2012, 16), which is why, in traditional Japanese, the term has additional connotations regarding representation, musical performance, oratory and ritual. In the modern Japanese language, however, the connotations of the verb *asobu* are 'play, diversion, pleasure, enjoyment, transformation and adulteration', the term referring to both children's play and to activities associated with entertainment and leisure. Therefore, *asobi*, as a nominal version of the verb *asobu*, would, on the one hand, mean entertainment and pleasure as/ through play and, on the other hand, rejection, as well as reconciliation with the serious elements of life (such as stringency and rules).

If the academic education system assumes the role of sharing cultural abilities with an increasing number of consumers (see Connor, 1999, 27), it is compelled to surpass the "disturbing uncertainty" that has begun to affect the borders between the elevated culture, which had traditionally become the universities' appanage, and the mass culture. The popular forms of culture, like television, movies, rock music, *manga*, etc., started to adopt the seriousness characteristic to forms of high culture. The reaction to cultural forms like the *komiXLit* format, which could be rejected on the premise that it does not belong to any form of "true" culture, must be – given their obvious proliferation – that of an approach, since they can be studied with the same advantages held by the forms of "high" culture which, throughout history, has built a guarantee of the continuous life of the humanities in the academic space. Just as musicians try, through their music, to capture silence, or architects develop complex shapes to fill an empty space, *komiXLit*, as an instrument of contemporary culture, seems to propose the scene of a new imaginary, becoming the voice that combines the tastes of the elites and those of the popular masses. The value, which is not inherent to any cultural artefact, objectively and permanently, will be conferred to any product only by the strategies of cultural use. Consequently, cultural authority and (self)legitimation seem to be issues that are only a matter of time for the *komiXLit* format.

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