

# Japanese Comics Abroad: The Case of Italy A Short History of Manga's Social and Cultural Perception in the <BEL PAESE>

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## Abstract

Manga, that is, Japanese comics, can be found in many countries. Italy has been an important territory for the circulation of manga, thanks to many anime (Japanese animated TV series) which have come to Italy since the late seventies. Japanese styles of comics, and the issues and narrative styles proposed by anime, have had important effects on two generations of Italian readers and spectators. Children have begun to imitate Japanese characters of anime and manga in their own drawings, and underground comics and fanzines have begun to print more and more manga-like stories and illustrations. Most important to Italian comics history, a new generation of authors and artists has started to write and draw stories keeping in mind the «lessons» of manga. This generation grew up watching anime on TV and absorbing their styles and issues, according to trans-cultural dynamics. This phenomenon is evident both in commercial, popular comics (Bonelli, Disney Italia) and in some «authorial» ones produced under the aegis of such publishers as Kappa Edizioni. This cultural dialectic between manga and fumetti has positive and negative outcomes.

**KEY WORDS** : Manga – Anime – Fumetti – Trans-cultural dynamics – Italy – Hybridization – Spaghetti-manga – Children’s drawings – Fanzines – Italian publishers.

## INTRODUCTION

At the end of the forced isolation of the Tokugawa era, Japan opened its doors to the West with the advent of the Meiji era (1868-1912). Openness to the West was also compulsory, but in this case with pretty positive cultural effects. Technology, politics, work policies, industry, social systems, transportation, school and university, everything in Japan was renewed, following partly Western patterns and partly autochthonous peculiarities [Reischauer, 1964].

In the case of popular arts, the encounter with European and North American expressive forms led to the naissance of a national animated film, which partly owed its main results to the technical-stylistic influences of American animated cartoons [Fusco, 1998; Lent, 2001; Pellitteri, 2005].

Yet an important sector of Japanese cultural industry remained rather separated from the West

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and only in recent times an explosive opening to the rest of the world has occurred. Until the second half of the seventies, Japan, with *manga* and *anime*,<sup>1</sup> was mainly influential in the neighbouring areas, such as Korea, China and the South-East [Ng, 2000], assuming in many aspects the role of the «West» among Asian countries, and so also for her peculiar role in the mass communications system [Iwabuchi, 2002].

Nevertheless, precisely in the seventies something very interesting happened. Since the sixties the Japanese animation industry had noticed that the series designed to be broadcast not only in Japan but also in the United States, such as *Tetsuwan Atom*, *Mach Go Go Go* or *Jungle Taitei*,<sup>2</sup> had gained a very good success. Thus, also under indirect request by the international market of entertainment products for kids and teenagers, which was becoming more and more globalist in the broadcasting/distribution strategies and routines, many *anime* production companies began to produce or sometimes co-produce, with European societies, tv series set in the western world, taken from classic novels such as *Cuore*, *Sans famille*, *Heidi*, *Peter Pan*. Hence new spaces were opened also for «all Japanese» animated series: Japanese in the graphic line, in the settings, in the narrative styles, in the values and issues. The European networks, but mainly the Italian ones, were encouraged by a big political juncture that in 1976 opened in Italy the way to a liberalization of the television frequencies. Hundreds of local channels were soon born, until the advent of Fininvest—today Mediaset—Berlusconi's tv network [Menduni, 1996]. All these channels found themselves in the need of filling hours and hours of daily broadcast programmings, and these Japanese animated series, launched onto the international markets at extremely cheap prices, were their big resource. Production costs for the Italian channels were limited to the mere dubbing; above all, the level of narrations and the animation techniques of these Japanese *anime* were very good in comparison to the mediocre American and European tv animated series. *Anime* had a spectacular innovation effect with the incontestable originality of many plots, characters, story-telling styles.<sup>3</sup>

The systematic arrival of *manga* in Italy has therefore been possible, like it has occurred in other western Countries such as France, Switzerland, Spain, USA or more recently Germany, thanks to the big and almost «unintentional» support of what had been sowed and stratified along the years by the *anime*'s spectacular communicative power throughout the television medium.<sup>4</sup> Among the above-mentioned countries, Italy represents a borderline case. Firstly, for the immense amount of *anime* broadcast on Italian TV channels from 1976 up to now, more than in other countries. And—secondly—for the consequent flux of *manga* published since 1990.

### **The several advents of *manga* in Italy**

The first, epiphanic *manga* in Italy dates back to 1962. In that year Garzanti Publishing from

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<sup>1</sup> *Anime* is the common name for Japanese animated series and films, even if the traditional names are *manga eiga* for animated films and *TV manga* for television animation.

<sup>2</sup> Exported to the US respectively as *Astro Boy*, *Speed Racer*, *Kimba the White Lion*, and imported to Italy in the eighties as *Astroboy*, *Super Auto Mach 5 Go Go Go* and *Kimba il leone bianco*. An interesting and somehow amusing lecture about the issue of *anime* in the US is Newitz, 1995. About *manga* in the US cf. Rifas, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The rich «social history» of Japanese popular imagery in Italy, known mainly through *anime*, is reconstructed in Pellitteri, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> One of the most important studies of the huge number of Japanese animated series and films brought to Italy is Baricordi et al., 1991 (Engl. ed. 2000).

Milan printed *Son-Goku* by Shifumi Yamane [Di Fratta, 2005]. This is a curious coincidence, since the legend that this *manga* is taken from—the one of the stone monkey Sun Wukong, protagonist of the Chinese tale *Hsi Yu Chi* (‘Memory of a Voyage to West’) by Wu Ch’eng-en—is exactly the same which has inspired many other *manga* and *anime* in Italy. Among these was the bestselling *manga*, *DragonBall*. This *manga* in fact would be published in Italy about 30 years later, in 1995, by Star Comics from Perugia, with amazing sales and a big number of reprints in a very few years (the last one, in a *deluxe* full color version, in 2006). Nevertheless, another 17 years was necessary to see new *manga* published in Italy. With the *exploit* of the very first TV robotic series imported to Italy, such as *UFO Robot Grendizer*, *Wakusei Robo Danguard Ace*, *Great Mazinger* and *Mazinger Z*,<sup>5</sup> many publishers began to produce books, illustrated albums, and magazines telling the adventures of these new mechanical heroes, *in primis* Giunti-Marzocco and RAI-ERI [Castelli—Bono, 1983; Castellazzi *et al.*, 1999]. Many of these products had licenses of dubious authenticity and were illustrated by inattentive (mainly Italian and Spanish) draftsmen, not used to drawing characters so different from western styles. However, these comics, not less than the original *manga*, contributed to the diffusion of a symbolic universe amongst young spectators, readers and consumers, that then would promote the popularity of *manga* in Italy. There was, by the way, another publishing activity, a little more accurate, dedicated to authentic Japanese *manga*: the main publishers of this «new» kind of comics were the RCS group, with the magazine for children *Corriere dei Piccoli*, and Fabbri, with several illustrated albums and hardcover books.<sup>6</sup>

In 1979 the first authentic *manga* of this wave, based on the corresponding animated series, was hosted in the full color book *Io, il Grande Mazinger*,<sup>7</sup> published by Fabbri. Many other *manga* followed, mostly of the *shojo* genre (dedicated to girls, one of the most popular trends), such as *Georgie*, *Luna*, *Susy del Far West*, *Hello Spank*, *Kitty la stella del circo*, *La storia di Alice*, *L’incantevole Creamy*, *Lady Love*, *Mila e Shiro*.<sup>8</sup> The publication of these very first *manga* was not very faithful, though, featuring non-original colors, re-editing of the drawings, a big freedom in the translation of dialogues, and the cutting of some scenes. The intention was to exploit the success of the respective animated series that in those years were broadcast on TV and that were finding a big following amongst a very young audience (and condemnation by adults, due to aesthetic intolerance, masked as vigorous pedagogical anxiety). It is

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<sup>5</sup> Titled in Italy *Atlas Ufo Robot*, *Danguard*, *Il Grande Mazinga*, *Mazinga Z*. Some of these robots and others have had a short season of relative success also in the USA, as *Shogun Warriors*. In the US, *Mazinger Z* is better known as *Trantor Z*.

<sup>6</sup> Rcs group is a huge publishing holding from Milan that owns Rizzoli publishing house (books and magazines), *Corriere della Sera* (the main Italian newspaper) and other journals and publishing houses in Italy and abroad. *Corriere dei Piccoli*, whose publication actually ceased in 1995, was the very first weekly magazine that published comics in Italy, in 1908; since the eighties *Corriere dei Piccoli* used to publish not only Italian comics and manga but also anime comics, that is comics-like stories using frames from tv anime instead of the usual drawings.

<sup>7</sup> It was one of the several versions of the *Mazingers’ manga*. The one published in Italy in this book was the very first version, written by the character’s creator, Go Nagai, and drawn by his assistant Gosaku Ota in 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Some data on the series published in Italy in those years. 1982: *Georgie* (*Georgie!*, 1982, Yumiko Igarashi—Man Izawa), published by Fabbri; *Luna* (*Fosutiimu*, 1978, Chieko Hara), Fabbri; *Susy del Far West* (*Meimii Enjeru*, 1979, Yumiko Igarashi), Fabbri; *Hello, Spank* (*Ohayo! Spank*, 1978, Shun’ichi Yukimuri—Shizue Takanashi), RCS. 1983: *Kitty la stella del circo* (*Timu Timu Sekasu*, 1981, Kyoko Mizuki—Yumiko Igarashi), Fabbri; *La storia di Alice* (*Kaze no Sonata*, 1982, Chieko Hara), Fabbri. 1984: *L’incantevole Creamy* (*Maho no tenshi Creamy Mami*, 1983, Yuko Kitagawa—Kazunori Ito), RCS. 1985: *Lady Love* (id., 1981, Hiromu Ono), RCS; *Mila e Shiro, due cuori nella pallavolo* (*Attacker Yu!*, 1984, Jun Makimura—Shizuo Koizumi), RCS. Cf. Di Fratta, 2005, cit.

worth noting that many of these series would be later re-published by more careful publishers, in versions respectful of the original, for the same audience: ex-kids now become adult and assiduous readers of Japanese productions.

1990 is the year of the final arrival of *manga* in Italy. Glénat Italia published *Akira* (1982, Katsuhiro Otomo), whose huge success led in 1988 to a spectacular animated movie and to the publication in full color in the US, precisely the version of the *manga* later published by Glénat in Italy. 1990 is also, more than Glénat's, Granata Press' year, a publisher from Bologna which adopted an organic editorial strategy. Granata published anthologies and monograph series in little books, following the pattern of Japanese *tankobon* mixed to a pretty Italian publishing format.

But after the sudden financial collapse of Granata Press, due to the unexpectedly huge dimensions of its success, the role of market leader was taken by Star Comics, the only strong *manga* publisher in Italy until the coming of Panini Comics with her Planet Manga division in 1994 and other, smaller publishers, still very active, such as Hazard from Milan and Coconino Press from Bologna.

In recent times we can look at another phase of *manga* in Italy. Nowadays a saturation of the market corresponds to a big variety of proposals, from the very commercial to the pretty sophisticated ones. In Italy today it is difficult to publish experimental and «authorial» *fumetti*,<sup>9</sup> and this is even more difficult for the Asiatic ones, which—outside the *aficionados*' circles—suffer a stereotypical reputation according to which they are considered as soulless, hyperkinetic and even too violent or sexually explicit. But some publishers, mainly Coconino Press and Kappa Edizioni from Bologna—the town that has always hosted the most experimental comics movements—are cleverly supporting sophisticated works for the most exigent audiences. These authorial works live cheek-to-cheek with the ones more popular with teenagers, who meanwhile have grown up during a second «invasion» of *anime* broadcast in the nineties by Mediaset and MTV.

### **Glocal<sup>10</sup> drifts: spontaneous production, spaghetti-manga and manga-style injections**

Alongside this progressive cultural «colonization» by Japanese products, something has happened also in western production, and Italian in particular. As often happens, the local *humus* permitted the flourishing of new fruits: «mutant» comics, derived from Japanese seeds.

The influence of *manga* and *anime*, and of their graphic and narrative styles, has become evident on several levels: first, in childrens' and teenagers' drawings. The new generations draw using a style reminiscent of *manga* and *anime*. This phenomenon has consequences on expressive, cognitive and psychological planes that, even nowadays, have not been deeply analyzed. Very few observers, during the years, seem to have realized that kids, since the late seventies, in their own artistic practices have begun

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<sup>9</sup> «Fumetti» (pl. m., «fumetto» s. m.) is the Italian word for comics. The word comes from the italian name for balloons.

<sup>10</sup> The word *glocal* is here intended in the sense explained in Robertson, 1995.

more and more often to reproduce, consciously or not, somatic types and conventions of Japanese animation.

Eyes, heads, bodies, technical objects, space ships, symbols (i.e. stars, flowers, sweat drops on the faces of the characters represented) often tend to imitate, in the drawings of the children accustomed to television animation, the expressive codes of the Japanese shows, according to emulative conducts of trans-cultural nature [Pellitteri *et al.*, 2002].

Actually this fact had been already remarked, 30 years ago, by psychologists Piero Bertolini and Milena Manini [1976; rev. ed. 1993]. In their book were annotated, even if *en passant*, some brand new practices of children's graphic production influenced by the consumption of the new animated shows. The exiguous following of those indications, even by psychologists who specifically deal with children's artistic production, is evident also in recent research. A new study entitled *Il disegno dei bambini* shows many drawings explicitly inspired from the faces and the big eyes of *anime* and *manga*'s characters, but without commenting on the fact, perhaps without noticing it at all [Cannoni, 2003]. Other contributions, like one by two very sensitive art-therapists, take note of these trends [Cocconi—Salzillo, 2001], besides some propedeutic and/or academic texts specifically dedicated to Japanese mass culture in its relationships with Italian youth imaginary [Pellitteri, 1999, and 2004; Filippi—Di Tullio, 2002].

Another phenomenon of extreme interest is a sort of a fusion between the above-mentioned procedures of spontaneous graphic creation and the dynamics of semi-professional editorial production. It is the realization of comics according to stylistic canons closely following the Japanese ones. This kind of production is mostly by amateurs, linked to fandom and fan publications. These fanzines represent an effect of the cultural process which has weighed on the new generations' modalities of personal artistic expression. During the teenage and then adult years this new generation does not set out to be fashionable according to current trends. The lesson of *manga*, instead, has been so fully absorbed since childhood, that now expressing themselves by means of styles more or less near to Japanese comics turns out to be natural. This growing close to *manga* by many Italian drawers—but, it must be noticed, mostly *female* ones—occurs in many settings. There are the fanzine producers who, by a green outline, draw little camp stories that pleasantly ape the bi-dimensional and iconic line of the most loved Japanese authors. There are the authors of the so-called *shonen ai*, *manga* intended for a niche female audience which transpose the *clichés* of love novels in a homo-erotic key, but with only male characters [Sabucco, 2000]. There are, lastly, amateur drawers who at the comics-conventions take little writing-desks here and there and exhibit, sell, or give for free, their *manga* drawings and plates.

This is the burgeoning activity by a section of Italian readers very fond of *manga*, who felt and feel the need to become prosumers, even simply in a very private form, in accordance with typical dynamics of all *aficionados*' communities and subcultures.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, besides the two above-mentioned phenomena there are three specific modalities with which that trend, soon christened «*manga all'italiana*» ('*manga* Italian way'), has concretely occurred in the world of professional production. The first, that is the coarsest but with a deep significance, is the one today named—with a bit of scorn—*spaghetti-manga: fumetti* written and drawn by Italians where Japan-like issues are melded with an accentuated graphic cast based on *manga* design (either in the characters' figures or the general panels' design). In the mid-nineties one publishing house

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<sup>11</sup> On the subcultures of Italian *anime* and *manga* fans cf. Impegnoso, 1999; Molle, 2001; Filippi—Di Tullio, 2002, cit.; Frigo, 2005; Vanzella, 2005.

rode this trend more than the others, Comic Art from Rome, by printing miniseries whose look and style was an homage to the *tankobon* editorial format.

This «fashion», however, did not last. *Manga*, in Italy, had entered the chromosomes of many readers and of several (actual or aiming) authors much more deeply than in other countries. And thus in Italy Japanese influences, which as stated above had pierced in depth in the local youth culture since the late seventies, have produced, in professional *fumetto*, a second and a third modality for «*manga all'italiana*». On one side was the middling of styles recalling *manga* in popular *fumetti* of such big publishers as Bonelli and Disney Italia. On the other side was the conscious and artistically driven use of both graphic and narrative *manga's* suggestions and atmospheres from authors peripheral to the big publishers' industrial production and favoured by the reliance of some small and medium publishing houses which shared with them the same youthful imagination and the same idea of *fumetto*.

Thus, on one side authors working for Bonelli, like the trio Michele Medda—Antonio Serra—Bepi Vigna (creators of *Nathan Never* and *Legs Weaver*) in the nineties have taken many issues from Japanese sci-fi comics, mixing them either to the specific characteristics of «Bonellian» *fumetto* or to many *clichés* of the American superhero comics. This has been helped by some authors (writers and drawers) whose young age betrays with no doubt their belonging to what elsewhere has been defined as the *Goldrake-generation*,<sup>12</sup> the age class of those who grew up watching the very first wave of tv *anime*. Still about Bonelli it is worth mentioning Luca Enoch, who makes a less explicit, but more mature, use of *manga* «styles» with a character of his, *Gea*, which marries an Italian narrative and visual background to Japanese reminiscences and citations. Enoch finds an audience with both the customary Bonelli readers and the *manga* readers, who have extended their reading horizons to Bonelli's comics, the most traditional Italian *fumetti*. On the other side there are other authors, young as well, with solid professional grounding, who are united by sophisticated poetics and who are living a process of progressive ripening, such as Andrea Accardi, Giovanni Mattioli, Davide Toffolo, Vanna Vinci and others.

They, under the aegis of above-mentioned Kappa Edizioni, in the mid-nineties have begun to publish, in magazines like *Fandango* and *Mondo Naïf*, and shortly after in monographic books, many *fumetti* that are deeply Italian in the settings, in the narrative and graphic technique, in the texts' literary quality, and in the issues tackled. These authors do not want to, or perhaps cannot, renounce an intense participation in Japanese imagery. This is evident in some of the rhetoric, such as the lengthened silences and the visual *enjambements*; the diegetic, like the *mise en page* of the vignettes, their shape and the transitions from one to another; the illustrative, like some structural elements of the characters, such as faces recalling certain somatic traits of Japanese heroes or the slender bodies typical of many romantic *manga's* protagonists; and finally, the technical, like the use of dash and full black fillings (very common in Italian *fumetto*) but also the grays and the occasional adhesive textures of several types and grains, an enriching factor for stories printed in sober monochromy—and which, *cela va sans dire*, also occurs in *manga* [Barbieri, 1991; Pellitteri, 1998].

Thus *manga* turns out to be influential—explicitly or subtly—both in mainstream comics and in many of the experimental and *élite* comics. This supports the thesis of a substantial transversality in the cultural reception of Japanese popular forms in Italy, not only in the perception by young audiences but, most interestingly, also in autochthonous cultural production, which in recent times from *fumetto* has

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<sup>12</sup> Goldrake is the Italian name of the protagonist giant robot in the *UFO Robot Grendizer* TV animated series, entitled in Italy *Atlas UFO Robot*. The definition seems to have been used for the first time in Pellitteri, 1999, cit.

reached TV animated series designed in Italy yet intended for a globalized market. The commercial success of *Winx Club* and *Monster Allergy* are the most eclectic cases.

### When the hybridization is troublesome

What until now I have called *manga-style* probably does not exist, or, it is failing better theoretical and operational definitions that the expression is used. *Manga* are characterized by innumerable styles and *topoi* in conformity with the genres, the ages where they are realized, and the authors.<sup>13</sup> What in the West is usually seen as characteristic of *manga* are some physical characters' traits (big eyes, pointed chins, explosive youth-like faces, physiques often slender and tall), the graphic storytelling by «crooked» vignettes, the exaggerated presence of kinetic lines, and the terseness of dialogues in comparison with the overwhelming wordiness of many Western popular comics.

Nevertheless it is just the «average» of graphic and rhetorical attitudes in *manga* that has usually been absorbed by most Western observers, including the Italian ones.

With the exception of very few authors, such as those mentioned above who were associated with Kappa Edizioni—who have learnt a subtler and artistically based lesson from their Japanese readings—most authors and local editorial systems that have absorbed certain modalities of *manga* storytelling tend to ape the tritest *clichés* of commercial Japanese comics, thus inflicting on readers either the so-called *spaghetti-manga* or vulgar and rather awkward citations of *topoi* and styles in Japanese strips.

It would be easy to throw the blame of this outcome, even too obliging towards *manga's* audience, entirely to the authors, who have surely their creative limits but who always try to offer the readers good quality products, created by a honest job. The heaviest responsibilities belong to the Italian publishing system and particularly to the strategic direction of the biggest comics publishing houses, which maybe have believed they had to run after the current fashions, but eventually encouraged many other publishers and underground authors to follow them. The result was that comics production was not able to absorb and assimilate a *corpus* of graphic-narrative modalities so deeply different from those of local comics.

Thus, today there are bright examples of excellent interiorization of *manga* inside a soundly European idea of comic art, as Alessandro Barbucci and Barbara Canepa's *Sky Doll*<sup>14</sup> prove, or the trans-cultural style by Massimiliano Frezzato and Simone Bianchi. Nevertheless some publishers, and above all Disney Italia, tend more and more to wink at *manga* in a cheeky way, and so betray a certain utilitarianism,<sup>15</sup> nourishing a compulsory hybridization that in this phase of the Italian comics market seems quite unnatural. Yet very probably in the medium term it will be so peacefully grafted onto the

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<sup>13</sup> One of the best contributions in Italian on the languages and styles of *manga* is Posocco, 2005. In French cf. Groensteen, 1991 and in English Schodt, 1983, and 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Barbucci and Canepa are also graphic creators of the above-mentioned *Monster Allergy*.

<sup>15</sup> Consider the global phenomenon of *WITCH* (comic books, animated series, merchandising), an explicit derivation of the Japanese series *SailorMoon*, and the primary inspiration in its turn for the above-mentioned *Winx Club* comic/TV series.

brand new generations' readers, that perhaps no one of the young future readers will have any memory of the complex stages in the absorption of *manga* in Italy, from the discovery phase to interiorization, from the reproduction to the most recent leg, that of an autonomous, hybridized, glocalized creation. Thus the hope is that historical-critical works on *manga*'s expansion in the West can circulate as long as possible. Even in «trifles» like comics a bit of historical memory can only do good to everyone.

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