



Aesthetics and affective resistance in manga in Latin American digital culture

Estéticas y resistencias afectivas del manga en la cultura digital desde América Latina

Luciana Arcanjo Olave¹  

¹ Universidad de Santiago de Chile. Chile.

Submitted: 05-01-2025 | Revised: 10-03-2025 | Accepted: 08-05-2025 | Published: 09-05-2025

Corresponding Author: Luciana Arcanjo Olave 

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to address how the study of manga allows us to think critically about contemporary social, political, and cultural challenges in Latin America. It argues that the relevance of manga lies not only in its mass appeal or entertainment value, but also in its potential to activate forms of sensitivity, reflection, and resistance that allow us to question the hegemonic structures that shape everyday life in globalized capitalism. Through its visual, aesthetic, and affective narratives, manga offers a space for intercultural mediation where meanings, values, and emotions are brought into play and can be reinterpreted from local Latin American contexts, enabling new forms of critical reading and symbolic appropriation. In contexts such as Latin America, it is important to highlight manga's ability to incorporate critical discourses on neoliberalism, precariousness, and collective trauma. From a cultural communication perspective, manga creates a space where meanings, affections, and forms of micro-political resistance are negotiated, favoring readings that integrate the intimate and the structural, the global and the local. Thus, it becomes a key tool for thinking critically about the contemporary world from a predominantly digital culture. On the other hand, access to manga has historically been mediated by unofficial technological practices, such as piracy, fansubbing, and scanlation, which allowed Latin American fan communities to access content that was not available in their languages or countries. These practices not only facilitated access, but also generated new forms of active participation, where fans were not mere consumers, but translators, curators, and mediators of meaning, marking a pioneering form of digital literacy, collective use of software, collaborative online work, and decentralized distribution.

Keywords: Latin American Culture; Digital Culture; Affectivity; Manga.

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo busca abordar cómo estudio del manga permite pensar críticamente los desafíos sociales, políticos y culturales contemporáneos en América Latina. Se plantea que la relevancia del manga no radica solo en su masividad o capacidad de entretenimiento, sino en su potencial para activar formas de sensibilidad, reflexión y resistencia que permiten interrogar las estructuras hegemónicas que configuran la vida cotidiana en el capitalismo globalizado. A través de sus narrativas visuales, estéticas y afectivas, el manga ofrece un espacio de mediación intercultural donde se ponen en juego sentidos, valores y emociones que pueden ser resignificados desde los contextos locales latinoamericanos, habilitando nuevas formas de lectura crítica y apropiación simbólica. En contextos como el latinoamericano, es importante destacar la capacidad del manga para incorporar discursos críticos sobre el neoliberalismo, la precariedad o el trauma colectivo. Desde una perspectiva de comunicación cultural, el manga configura un espacio donde se negocian sentidos, afectos y formas de resistencia micropolítica, favoreciendo lecturas que integran lo íntimo y lo estructural, lo global y lo local. Así, deviene en una herramienta clave para pensar críticamente el mundo contemporáneo desde una cultura preponderantemente digital. Por otro lado, el acceso al manga ha estado históricamente mediado por prácticas tecnológicas no oficiales, como la piratería, el fansubbing y el scanlation, que permitieron a comunidades de fans latinoamericanos acceder a contenidos que no estaban disponibles en sus idiomas ni en sus países. Estas prácticas no solo facilitaron el acceso, sino que generaron nuevas formas de participación activa, donde los fans no fueron simples consumidores, sino traductores, curadores y mediadores de sentido, marcando una forma pionera de alfabetización digital, uso colectivo de software, trabajo colaborativo en línea y distribución descentralizada.

Palabras clave: Cultura Latinoamericana; Cultura Digital; Afectividad; Manga

INTRODUCTION

Although manga has traditionally been considered a product of youth entertainment, contemporary cultural studies have increasingly valued its capacity to articulate complex, sensitive, and politically significant narratives. In Latin America, it is also relevant to understand that its massification was from the outset marked by alternative forms of circulation—scanned, translated, and distributed by fans through digital technologies—thus challenging the official channels of access that, early on, were quite limited.

In this way, it is proposed that, far from representing a merely passive consumption, the narrative and aesthetic particularity of manga, together with the techno-political practices associated with its massification and distribution, have configured modes of relation to technology, visual language, and the production of meaning that open possibilities for thinking about the links between popular culture, digital communication, and social critique.

In aesthetic and narrative terms, it is proposed to explore how manga can be read as an affective technology that allows new forms of subjectivation and resistance to be experienced in the contemporary Latin American context, marked by neoliberalism, precarity, and malaise. In this sense, it is argued that certain manga works, in addition to mobilizing affects and identities, offer tools capable of representing the structural malaise of the present and enabling sensitive reconfigurations that could operate as conditions of possibility for transformation. Thus, although manga is not exempt from capitalist logics of consumption, it is argued that certain aspects of its aesthetics and narrative open spaces of resistance through experimentation and sensory immersion, allowing alternative forms of relation, community, and affect to be imagined, from a more embodied and non-rationalist dimension.

It is fundamental, therefore, to study the relationship between Japan and Latin America through the reception of manga, and how this reception reveals a cultural crossing that provides unique perspectives. In this sense, Japan presents Latin America with a vision and an aesthetic that, due to their singularity, would challenge hegemonic views and open the possibility of thinking new forms of resistance. In turn, the Latin American context creates spaces that make it possible to explore these forms of resistance in ways that would not be possible in other contexts. Thus, this reception of manga in Latin America would offer an opening to forms of resistance that, far from closing off or co-opting, would enrich and diversify the experience of thinking and feeling in the contemporary context, promoting a reconfiguration of affects and cultural practices that go beyond the limitations imposed by dominant structures.

On the other hand, in terms of techno-political practices, the unauthorized distribution carried out by fan communities, although considered illegal from the perspective of copyright, played a fundamental role in the consolidation of the formal manga and anime market.⁽¹⁾ These practices, which included fansubbing (fan subtitling), scanlation (digitization and translation of manga), and circulation on decentralized networks, not only enabled access to content inaccessible through official channels but also acted as mechanisms for audience formation, digital literacy, and demand generation. Thus, far from representing a mere threat to the commercial model, it could be argued that these forms of distribution anticipated and facilitated its expansion, functioning as a prerequisite for the subsequent legitimization and commercial exploitation in contexts such as the Latin American context. From this perspective, the techno-political practices of fans can be understood not only as acts of cultural resistance but also as fundamental gears in the processes of transnational circulation and localized appropriation of cultural goods in the digital age.

DEVELOPMENT

Japan and Latin America: Shared Tensions in the Face of Global Capitalism

The impact of Western intervention in Japan and Latin America, although geographically distant, presents notable parallels regarding its effects on the political, economic, and social structures of both regions. In Japan, forced opening to international trade and the reforms promoted during the Meiji Restoration dismantled the old feudal structures, giving way to a process of modernization that profoundly transformed the organization of Japanese society.⁽²⁾ Similarly, Western influence in Latin America, from colonization to the military and economic interventions of the twentieth century, imposed models that dismantled traditional systems, causing profound structural changes in local societies.⁽³⁾

In this sense, it is possible to point out that, although there are undeniable specificities in

each case, both regions have shared a historical experience of contact with the West marked by dynamics of violence, imposition, and contempt, which persist today in a more or less veiled manner through relations mediated by the economic and the political. Japan's brutal exposure to the annihilating power of atomic bombs, the direct support of foreign powers for military dictatorships in Latin America, and the continued presence of military bases constitute forms of violent intervention that have shaped the political and economic trajectories of two geographically distant regions, but structurally traversed by colonial logics.

This continuity of forms of domination has found a new expression in contemporary neoliberalism, whose consolidation and perpetuation have had profound material consequences for ways of thinking, feeling, and relating, both at the individual and collective levels. The generalized commodification of life transforms social relations, self-perception, and the bond with the environment into consumer goods, dismantling community ties in favor of an extreme individualism that perpetuates forms of alienation and exploitation. Neoliberalism operates from a specific rationality: not only as a form of governmentality but also as a technology of subjectivation that is inscribed in everyday behaviors.

Thus, without denying the devastating consequences of capitalism in the region and the world, this work aims to delve into the possibilities of resistance and the lines of flight that art, and specifically manga and anime productions, have offered and continue to offer to both Japan and Latin America when it comes to exploring, experimenting, and playing with meanings and affects.

This would open the opportunity to rethink affects, not only so that they resist but also so that they configure new ways of inhabiting and understanding the world or worlds in the context of globalized capitalism. Moreover, it could be a point where forms of solidarity between Japan and Latin America meet, provided there is an interest in exploring these alternatives of life and affects that move away from productive and utilitarian terms.

Manga as an Affective Technology of Resistance

This paper takes as its starting point the recognition of manga not only as a mass cultural product but also as a broad range of complex expressive forms that condense visual, affective, and political narratives.

In Japan, the term “manga” refers to a wide range of visual productions whose diversity of genres, styles, and formats allows for a constant expansion of audiences. Although the term has been linked in its origins to nineteenth-century ukiyoe prints, authors such as Exner (4) have shown that modern manga responds instead to the influence of Western animation and comics, especially American, which demonstrates the adaptability and capacity for reinvention that has historically characterized this language.

Recognizing this process is not only relevant from a historiographic point of view but is also theoretically and methodologically decisive for understanding manga as a format that, instead of being inscribed in a purely autochthonous genealogy, emerges and develops as a cultural device traversed by transnational flows, foreign narrative techniques, and operations of translation and visual adaptation that destabilize any fixed border between the own and the foreign.

This deterritorializing quality (5) is what opens manga to global circulation, allowing it to function simultaneously as a Japanese cultural object and as a visual language in constant translation. Taking this perspective into consideration implies assuming its constitutive heterogeneity and rejecting essentialist readings that reduce it to an expression of the Japanese in homogeneous terms.

Thus, far from reducing manga to a “Japanese comic,” it is necessary to regard it as a visual-narrative genre that displays a singular aesthetic, with its own resources such as visual onomatopoeia, subjective panels, and cinematic editing techniques.(6,7,8) This way of narrating and representing time, space, and the sensible differentiates it from other graphic traditions, opening possibilities for more fragmentary, sensory, and immersive readings, which could give rise to the resignification of multiple affects within the Latin American audience, generating transformative conditions of possibility.

Manga offers a way of experiencing and narrating the sensible that, although embedded in neoliberal logic, resists its frameworks through a distinct aesthetics and sensibility, making it a potential tool for affective reconfiguration and cultural resistance.

Manga can function as an affective technology of resistance insofar as it is a narrative medium operating within a productive tension: it is part of mass culture and responds to the market logics characteristic of neoliberal capitalism, yet it also preserves and activates an aesthetic sensibility rooted in Eastern philosophical-religious traditions, which promote a more integrated, multisensory, and relational perception of time, the body, and the environment.(9)

However, this traditional sensory conception would in turn enter into tension with the intense modernization and Westernization of contemporary Japan, where visual hyperstimulation and the consumer logic characteristic of neoliberalism prevail. Manga, as a mass medium, is situated within and transformed by this tension, since it responds to the demands of the market while also preserving narrative, symbolic, and sensory forms that refer back to a historically constructed aesthetic sensibility.

It is in this ambivalence that the key to the power of manga as an affective technology of resistance lies, since this ambivalence turns manga not only into a product of entertainment but also into a place where meanings, affects, and forms of experience are negotiated that challenge the aesthetic hegemony of the Western imaginary, centered on the rationalization, fragmentation, and instrumentalization of experience.

Thus, manga becomes a space where affects are negotiated and reconfigured, where the sensible can be felt otherwise, allowing the emergence of forms of subjectivity that escape (or put pressure on) the dominant modes of perception in globalized capitalism.

In material terms, manga, as a form of multimodal and multisensory communication, activates an aesthetic and cognitive experience that distinguishes it from other graphic traditions. Its combination of text, image, and sequentiality configures a singular narrative that involves complex processes of interpretation and construction of meaning, both visually and symbolically. As Méndez-Cabrera et al.(10) argue, this expressive richness allows not only the understanding of cultural ideas and symbols but also critical reflection on values and identities, thus favoring the development of independent thought. This potential is related to a way of reading and perceiving that transcends Western logic. Holt et al.(8) point out that *hyōgenron*, or “theory of expression,” identifies the minimal elements of manga (image, panel, and language) as constitutive of a deeply immersive narrative experience. This approach highlights the relevance of total page design and the integration of elements such as onomatopoeias, which in Japanese manga not only imitate sounds but also represent emotional and bodily states, functioning as visual and linguistic devices.

Likewise, studies such as those by Cohn (7) show that manga tends to use subjective panels and fragmented transitions, which promote a more intimate and interpretive narrative. This encourages an active reading on the part of the reader, who must reconstruct meanings not only from what is explicitly shown but also from what is suggested or implicit between panels, what Groensteen (11) calls the shown, the received, and the signified.

In this way, the narrative analysis of manga cannot be limited to conventional literary tools. It requires integrative methodologies that consider both the aesthetic and the affective and ideological dimensions. Structures such as those of Labov et al.(12) allow, in this sense, observing how the narrative organizes and hierarchizes events, evaluates what is narrated, and positions the reader as an active agent in the construction of meaning.

Taken together, these elements make manga an affective technology of resistance: a way of narrating and feeling that interpellates hegemonic forms of perception, promoting sensory and subjective experiences that can open onto other ways of inhabiting the world, in dialogue with diverse cultural contexts such as the Latin American context.

Technopolitics and digital culture from manga

In parallel, the global circulation of manga has generated not only a phenomenon of mass consumption, but also a phenomenon of creative, critical, and affective appropriation, especially in Latin American contexts. Its expansion coincided with the digitalization of cultural practices, facilitating access through pirate platforms, forums, fansubs, blogs, and social media. This non-institutionalized access allowed fans to articulate local and transnational communities, and to develop forms of technological appropriation that exceed passive consumption. Thus, it is proposed that the relationship between manga, technology, and digital culture gave rise to new forms of reading, distribution, and participatory production, transforming the conditions of knowledge circulation and redefining the reader's agency.

Unlike countries such as the Republic of Korea, in Japan manga in electronic format began to gain momentum only in 2012, coinciding with the expansion of the use of smartphones and tablets. However, as Berndt (13) observes, although today digitization is actively promoted by the major manga publishers, it tends to take two forms: (a) the reuse of already published works, adapted to the digital format; and (b) the publication of new manga produced directly on web platforms, known as “born digital,” with the intention of later being published in collected volumes.

In this way, major publishers seek to sustain an already consolidated business model, incorporating technological tools without significantly altering the traditional logic of distribution.

This strategy reveals a persistent valuation of the print format, which continues to function as the commercial core of the industry. This is why, despite technological advances, access to much digital content from countries outside Japan remains limited, whether due to distribution barriers, the lack of official translations, or rights restrictions. Consequently, although there have been advances in institutional access to manga and anime content, there remains a dependence on unofficial channels (such as fansubs or scans) to access works that have not been licensed outside Japan, that present themes considered niche, or that do not respond to the commercial interests of transnational publishers.

This situation has driven fan communities to continue assuming an active role in the circulation and translation of manga, reinterpreting, contextualizing, and adapting content for local audiences without this entailing greater economic profit beyond the donations they receive from other fans.

In this process, dynamics of affective and collaborative appropriation are generated that, although they operate outside the margins of legality, contribute to democratizing access to cultural expressions that would otherwise remain restricted by geographic, linguistic, and economic barriers. In this sense, informal distribution circuits not only fulfill a dissemination function, but can also be understood as spaces of resistance and resignification against the hegemonic logics of the global market. By translating, subtitling, and adapting content according to their own cultural codes, fan communities not only play an active role in intercultural mediation, but also challenge the centrality of major publishers and commercial platforms as the sole validators of legitimate access to content.

However, as Park (14) argues, the creation of unofficial translations or subtitles is an inherently contradictory phenomenon, since, although it allows global media markets to expand by facilitating the transnational circulation of audiovisual works, it also introduces tensions into intellectual property regimes, which constitute the legal and ideological framework through which global capital legitimizes profit extraction. In this sense, phenomena such as fansubbing act simultaneously as a form of resistance to centralized control of content and as a practice that can unintentionally contribute to consolidating the expansion of the very capitalist system it questions. Thus, by increasing the international visibility of certain works and generating new audiences, fansubbing can be appropriated by the industry as a form of informal market testing, functioning as unpaid cultural labor.

This dual condition, subversive and functional, reveals the complex relationship between participatory culture, digital technologies, and mercantile logic, in which gestures of symbolic reappropriation coexist with forms of structural reproduction.

Conclusions

This paper aims to explore how manga can be understood as an affective technology of resistance, capable of activating forms of subjectivity, sensibility, and agency in the context of globalized capitalism. From a perspective situated between Japan and Latin America, it seeks to examine the historical, aesthetic, and technological processes that configure these productions as visual and affective languages in constant tension between reproduction and flight, between market and dissidence, between the local and the global.

First, it can be said that both in Japan and in Latin America there are historical trajectories marked by the violent imposition of Western models of modernization, whose consequences remain present in the neoliberal configuration of their economies, subjectivities, and ways of life. This observation makes it possible to trace an analytical link between geographically distant regions that are, however, structurally traversed by colonial logics, where cultural expressions become key spaces for resisting, resignifying, and reimagining other forms of existence.

Second, it is proposed that the analysis of manga makes it possible to understand how certain narrative, aesthetic, and sensory forms inscribed in it open paths for experiences that challenge the instrumental rationality of neoliberalism. The multimodal composition of manga (that is, its hybridity between text, image, rhythm, and affect) activates a reading experience that requires active participation by the reader, who reconstructs meanings not only from what is explicit, but also from what remains on the margins: the suggested, the implicit, the affective. This way of narrating and perceiving, traversed by an aesthetic sensibility rooted in philosophical and cultural traditions different from Western ones, is presented as fertile ground for the reconfiguration of affects and meanings, especially in Latin American contexts where such narratives resonate with experiences of dispossession, symbolic violence, and the search for community.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the global circulation of manga, particularly through informal digital channels, gives rise to forms of cultural appropriation that exceed passive consumption. By translating, subtitling, and adapting content for local audiences, these fan communities not only democratize access to works that would otherwise remain restricted, but also build collaborative spaces of symbolic production, where affects, knowledge, and technique are shared horizontally. Nevertheless, this practice also embodies deep tensions, as it moves in an ambiguous zone between resistance and reproduction. Although it challenges official frameworks of distribution and translation, it can also be functional to the expansion of global markets by acting as a form of informal testing or unpaid cultural labor.

However, this ambivalence should not be understood as an obstacle, but rather as an indication of the political and aesthetic potential of manga and its forms of circulation. It is precisely in that tension that its power lies: in the possibility of hosting forms of affectivity, community, and knowledge that, even when inscribed in the circuits of capital, enable escapes, detours, and reappropriations that destabilize hegemonic logics. In this sense, manga does not represent an alternative external to capitalism, but rather a zone of friction where meanings and sensibilities are negotiated that can give rise to other ways of imagining, feeling, and inhabiting the world.

REFERENCES

1. Leonard S. Progress against the law: Anime and fandom, with the key to the globalization of culture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2005;8(3):281-305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877905055679>
2. Hane M. *Modern Japan: A historical survey*. Routledge; 2009.
3. Zibechi R. *Descolonizar el pensamiento crítico y las prácticas emancipatorias*. Desde Abajo; 2015.
4. Exner E. *Comics and the origins of manga: A revisionist history*. Rutgers University Press; 2021.
5. Deleuze G, Guattari F. *Mil mesetas: Capitalismo y esquizofrenia*. Vázquez J, translator. Editorial Pre-Textos; 2020.
6. Schodt FL. *Dreamland Japan*. Stone Bridge Press; 1996.
7. Cohn N. *The visual language of comics: Introduction to the structure and cognition of sequential images*. Bloomsbury Publishing; 2013.
8. Holt J, Fukuda T. The power of onomatopoeia in manga: An essay by Natsume Fusanosuke with translators' introduction. *Japanese Language and Literature*. 2022;56(1):157-84. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jll.2022.170>
9. Santiago Iglesias JA. *Manga: El cuadro flotante de la viñeta japonesa*. Editorial Comanegra; 2013.
10. Méndez-Cabrera J, Rodrigo-Segura F. Educación literaria, diversidad cultural y manga: Una propuesta para la formación de lectores. *Ocnos*. 2023;22(1):1-14. https://doi.org/10.18239/ocnos_2023.22.1.335
11. Groensteen T. *Comics and narration*. Miller A, translator. University Press of Mississippi; 2013.
12. Labov W, Waletzky J. Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*. 1997;7(1-4):3-38. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jnlh.7.02nar>
13. Berndt J. *Manga: Medium, Art and Material*. Leipziger Universitätsverlag; 2014.
14. Park JS. Digital media communication, intellectual property, and the commodification of language: The discursive construction of fansub work. *Language, Culture and Society*. 2019;1(2):244-66. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lcs.19001.par>

FUNDING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Luciana Arcanjo Olave.

Research: Luciana Arcanjo Olave.

Writing – original draft: Luciana Arcanjo Olave.

Writing – review and editing: Luciana Arcanjo Olave.