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**Surviving Hiroshima:
An Hermeneutical Phenomenology of *Barefoot Gen*
by Keiji Nakazawa¹**

Abstract

In this paper, I present a philosophical analysis of the famous manga series, *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen*) by Keiji Nakazawa, which is the author's quasi-fictional memoir of his childhood as an atom bomb survivor in Hiroshima, Japan. Against the backdrop of larger issues of war and peace, Gen's family struggles with his father's ideological rebellion against the nation's militaristic rule, leading to the family's persecution. The story then chronicles the cataclysmic effects of the bomb, and the fates of Gen and other survivors as they live through the aftermath of the detonation and the hardships of the American occupation. My framework for critique follows Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology, which applies the descriptive method of phenomenology to cultural texts.

Key words

Paul Ricoeur, manga, graphic memoirs, comics, sequential art, hermeneutical phenomenology, *Barefoot Gen*, Hiroshima, Keiji Nakazawa, autobiography

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In this paper, I present a philosophical analysis of the famous manga series, *Barefoot Gen (Hadashi no Gen)* by Keiji Nakazawa, which is the author's quasi-fictional memoir of his childhood as an atom bomb survivor in Hiroshima, Japan. Against the backdrop of larger issues of war and peace, Gen's family struggles with his father's ideological rebellion against the nation's militaristic rule, leading to the family's persecution. The story then chronicles the cataclysmic effects of the bomb, and the fates of Gen and other survivors as they live through the aftermath of the detonation and the hardships of the American occupation.

My framework for critique follows Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology, which applies the descriptive method of phenomenology to cultural texts. In particular, I adopt a Ricoeurian way of reading sequential art or comics, in order to bring out the existential issues that uniquely arise from Nakazawa's account and the medium he chose to use. Indeed, comics has come a long way from its initial association, in the public mind, with humor or lowbrow entertainment. The rise of the "graphic novel" over the past several decades is proof of the maturity of the form. Today, the burgeoning field of comics studies encompasses a number of scholarly anthologies, respected journals, conferences, and academic courses.

Academic approaches to works of sequential art include literary criticism, linguistic analysis, and semiotics. Philosophers have also taken a stab at issues pertaining to the form of comics, or its ethical or ontological contents. What I intend to do is offer a way of reading comics through Ricoeur's synthesis of phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation. I aim to show the relevance of this approach to reading or interpreting comics, i.e. to the problem of how comics makes meaning and its implications for the nature of consciousness. For Ricoeur, and contra Edmund Husserl, we can only aim for an interpretation, rather than a pure description, of the objects of consciousness. Understanding the meaning of the world thus entails understanding the meaning of one's life in one's cultural and historical contexts. Through a Ricoeurian approach toward comics, using *Barefoot Gen* as a source text, the paper aims to engage with the peculiar amalgamation of the visual and the verbal so often found in cultural texts – and which is most evident in comics.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology

Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) was one of the early French translators and scholars of Edmund Husserl. Compared to Husserl's other existentialist critics such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur does not enjoy quite the same stature or following. In the area of phenomenological hermeneutics, his influence is similarly eclipsed by that of Hans Georg Gadamer.

One reason for the relative neglect of Ricoeur's rich insights may be the dialectic progression of his thought. He was not given to a dramatic uncompromising stance toward polarizing issues, but tended to make the best of both worlds, so to speak. As Ihde² (1971, 14) notes in his prescient summation of Ricoeur's methodology, written in the middle of the philosopher's career, "The general strategy of opposing two sides of a polarity leading to a limit concept becomes a major tactic of Ricoeur's thought."

On one hand, Ricoeur acknowledges the importance of the phenomenological *epoché* in exposing the errors of the natural attitude, or of objectivist or scientific paradigms. On the other hand, he also points to the limitations of extreme subjectivism in Husserl's stance, introducing hermeneutics as a corrective to phenomenology. The result is a hybrid approach that lends itself not so much to other philosophers' critique as to extra-philosophical applications.

Another reason why Ricoeur seems to be less popular than other hermeneutical phenomenologists is that his major projects tend to be open-ended, and he would move from one topic to another not so much by logical necessity as by "infamous" detours³. His first major concern was the philosophy of the will, to which he applied his teacher Merleau-Ponty's work on the phenomenology of perception. Then in his related study of the nature of evil, he took a linguistic turn and investigated the role of symbols in the making of meaning. Thereafter he pursued issues concerning time and narrative, memory, intersubjectivity, justice, political philosophy, and ethics⁴. Consequently perhaps, Ricoeur's ideas

² D. Ihde, 1986. *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. USA: Northwestern University Press.

³ D. Pellauer, *Ricoeur: A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York 2007, p. 42.

⁴ G. Madison, "The Interpretive Turn in Phenomenology: A Philosophical History", [in:] *Between Description and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology*, ed. A. Wiercinski, Toronto 2005, pp. 32–33.

have a wide applicability, not the least of which is in the analysis and interpretation of sequential art. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on his hermeneutical phenomenology, a method of interpretation that takes off from a critique of Husserl's idealism.

Ricoeur tempers Husserl's premise that essences could be directly intuited, by introducing the significance of textual mediation. He thus attempts to bring phenomenology and hermeneutics together (hermeneutics, which arose from the science of biblical interpretation, developed separately from phenomenology). Ricoeur was not the only one to do so; both Heidegger and Gadamer also emphasized the key role that language plays in our understanding of concrete experience. These three thinkers thus represent the "interpretive turn in phenomenology"⁵.

The value Ricoeur put on interpretation derived from his insight that "the symbol gives rise to the thought"⁶. He found that the phenomenon of evil could only be understood indirectly through a critical engagement with our myths about it⁷ (Simms 2002, 32-33). His linguistic turn after *The Symbolism of Evil* led to his interest in Freud – to psychoanalysis as a kind of hermeneutics of the psyche – and to his critical engagement with structuralism, which he took to task for its atemporal and objectivist bias⁸. Toward the latter part of his career, Ricoeur developed a theory of textuality and discourse, which saw the world itself as textual and human beings as constantly engaged in interpretation⁹.

In "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" (1975), Ricoeur sketches the possibility of an alternative both to the objectivism of the natural attitude and the subjectivism of Husserlian idealism. The main insights presented in this piece, in particular that phenomenology presupposes hermeneutics and vice versa, underpin Ricoeur's abovementioned writings in the theory of interpretation, exemplifying his own approach to concretizing the *meanings* of being. The article evinces two theses: (1) "What hermeneutics has ruined is not phenomenology, but one of its interpretations, namely its *idealistic* interpretation by Husserl himself...." and (2) "Beyond a mere opposition, there exists between phe-

⁵ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁶ P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, New York 1967, p. 352.

⁷ K. Simms, "Chapter 4: Metaphor", [in:] *Routledge Critical Thinkers*, 61-77. n.p.: Taylor & Francis Ltd/Books, 2002. Literary Reference Center, EBSCOhost [accessed: 1.11.2014].

⁸ D. Pellauer, op. cit., pp. 44-57, *passim*.

⁹ K. Simms, op. cit., p. 31.

nomenology and hermeneutics a mutual belonging which is important to explicate”¹⁰.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutical phenomenology is particularly applicable to the interpretation of texts produced after what Mitchell¹¹ calls the “pictorial turn.” With the proliferation of the visual in media, a philosophical lens for critical analysis becomes important, in that the visual cannot be explicitly reduced to a logical proposition. Its meaning can even be subliminal and often controversial. It can also be laden with ideological assumptions, as for example when feminists critique certain works of art as having been produced through the male gaze¹². Sequential art or comics, as a genre of visual art, can be meaningfully elucidated by a hermeneutical phenomenology that pays attention to its formal elements – e.g. imagery, timing, framing, etc. – as these relate to the expression of concrete human experience. It is to this subject that I turn in the next section.

Comics: Formal elements, issues, and theories

On definitions

Let us start with the word “comics” itself. It suggests levity; after all, its singular form, “comic,” functions as an adjective that describes something humorous¹³. In the context of American culture, comics connotes a superficial or low art form. If you consider the history of the English language, however, Harvey¹⁴ argues that the term “cartoon” is more precise than “comics.” The former derives from the Italian word *cartone* which means card – after the designs etched on sheets of cardboard that are then transferred onto walls or cloth, as a preliminary study for the final work. Cartooning only attained the sense of the comical through the drawings of American newspaper cartoonists, first published in Sunday

¹⁰ P. Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and hermeneutics”, *Noûs*, 1975, IX, p. 85. JSTOR. Web. 16 Jan. 2015.

¹¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn”, [in:] *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago 1994, p. 11.

¹² See: J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972.

¹³ R. Harvey, “Describing and Discarding ‘Comics’ as an Impotent Act of Philosophical Rigor”, [in:] *Comics as Philosophy*, ed. J. McLaughlin, Jackson 2005, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

magazine supplements in New York in the 1890s, which were primarily meant to entertain and elicit humor¹⁵.

Nowadays, “comics” can refer to a wide range of literary forms, not all of which are funny or trivial, and many of which may feature mature, abstract, and highly intellectual content. Despite its misleading connotation of humor, the term remains in widespread use. For this reason I use it interchangeably with “sequential art,” whose more scholarly sense calls attention to comics’ formal elements and relationship with other art forms. “Sequential art” has been popularized by Will Eisner, whose prodigious work in the American comics industry during its inception contributed to its evolution, in both style and content, toward the complex medium that it is today.

Given the broadness of “comics,” it is necessary to mention the more nuanced terms that fall under its umbrella. Comics is a catchall term for a static print or digital medium primarily characterized by the mix of verbal and visual components, which can refer to the comic strip, the single-panel cartoon or comic spot such a *New Yorker* cartoon, comic books, and graphic novels. Finally, one more special term needs to be explained, namely “manga.” Manga is simply the Japanese term for comics, and refers to the specific style of comics made in Japan. Manga’s processes of production and cultural reception differ markedly from those of English-language comics, as will be explained in detail in a succeeding section.

Will Eisner: A poetics of comics

Many introductory books comprehensively discuss the formal elements of comics, such as Eisner¹⁶, McCloud¹⁷, Bongco¹⁸, Saraceni¹⁹, and Groensteen²⁰. All works are scholarly, although the first two enjoy the

¹⁵ Ibidem, pp. 23–24.

¹⁶ W. Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Florida 1985.

¹⁷ S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York 1993.

¹⁸ M. Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, New York and London 2000.

¹⁹ M. Saraceni, *The Language of Comics*, New York 2003.

²⁰ T. Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. B. Beaty, N. Nguyen, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi 2009; idem, *Comics and Narration*, trans. A. Miller, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi 2015.

most authoritative status; they are cited by every other introductory book on the comics form. Not only are they pioneering, but they are also written by comics practitioners themselves. Eisner in particular shaped the development of the graphic novel. His works mark the boundary between the early incarnation of American comics and the more serious and variegated forms that are studied by scholars today. McCloud's book, though unique in that it is itself entirely rendered in comics form, essentially elaborates on Eisner's insights and theses. The following discussion will present Eisner's framework for understanding comics as sequential art.

Eisner discusses at least five formal elements, providing examples from his own work to illustrate each one. In this way, his book *Comics and Sequential Art* becomes a poetics of comics, an artistic manifesto, an instructional manual, and a guide for criticism all at the same time.

One element is *imagery*. Eisner²¹ observes that words and images, the two major "communicating devices" of comics, have a single origin. Letters started out as pictographs, and the Chinese art of calligraphy demonstrates the stylistic dimension of writing itself²². Even key images in comics may be based on a basic symbol; for example, the "worship symbol" as an Egyptian hieroglyph and a Chinese character mimics the posture of an individual kneeling and praying. The symbol, when fleshed out as an image, is infused with specific emotional qualities depending on the lighting, atmosphere, and other verbal and visual amplifications²³. He notes,

By the skilled manipulation of this seemingly amorphous structure and an understanding of the anatomy of expression, the cartoonist can begin to undertake the exposition of stories that involve deeper meanings and deal with the complexities of human experience.²⁴

In keeping with words and images as a unitary phenomenon, images themselves can function *as* words. Examples include postcards being used as verbal/visual devices to frame a story, and onomatopoeic words such as "bang!" functioning as images²⁵. Images may also be presented

²¹ W. Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 17–19.

without words, as in the case of a pantomimic sequence, an artistic feat that presumes a relative sophistication on the part of the reader in interpreting inner feelings²⁶.

A second element is *timing*. Eisner²⁷ waxes philosophical as he describes time as an essential structure of human experience, which in itself makes it a key element in the art of comics. The panel (sometimes also referred to as the frame or box), the caption, and the speech balloon may all serve as time indicators; the panel more so in that it contains the action and hence illustrates the duration of an event. More panels indicate compressed time²⁸.

A third element, related to the previous one, is *framing*. Just as time or duration is integral to human experience, perception occurs in frames or episodes. A comics panel freezes “one segment in what is in reality an uninterrupted flow of action”²⁹. The reader’s imagination fills in the empty space between panels, called the gutter.

The element of framing in comics invites comparisons to theater and cinema. Like the theatrical stage, a comics frame presents a scene populated by actors or characters³⁰. But unlike the cinematic frame which is the product of technology, the comics frame is part of the creative process itself³¹. Recording a scene and editing a video require more mechanical intervention than comics paneling, in which the narrative illustration is edited in the artist’s mind and then rendered directly on the page. A key difference of comics from live action media is that, given a static page around which the eye can freely roam, the comics artist has less power over the audience’s perceptual experience. Thus, the panel becomes a “medium of control” that directs the reader’s manner of viewing scenes³². This control may be exercised in several ways.

First, the panel embodies the artist’s choice of focus: the full figure of a character may be shown, as opposed to medium or close-up. When only a sequence of heads is shown, it is presumed that the reader imagines the rest of each figure outside the borders³³. As a slice of reality,

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 24.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 25.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 28.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 39.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 89.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 38.

³² Ibidem, p. 40.

³³ Ibidem, pp. 42–43.

the panel may also adopt different perspectives – e.g. a worm’s eye view or a bird’s eye view – which may convey a sense of alarming nearness or objective distance, respectively³⁴.

Second, the page itself may be utilized as a meta-panel; it can function as a full frame in the case of the splash page, or divided into different-sized or -shaped boxes which are themselves determined by the timing and rhythm of the action³⁵. The rich examples taken from Eisner’s *Spirit* series attest to the range of his artistic style and the exciting possibilities of the comics page.

Finally, the artist can play with panel borders as narrative devices. For example, a wavy border can serve as a past time indicator while a cloudlike one suggests a thought or a memory. A jagged frame conveys an emotionally charged situation; a long panel provides the illusion of height; a panel out of which a character bursts can magnify the sense of threat³⁶. A panel outline can be absent entirely to suggest unlimited space, whereas the opposite – confinement – can be conveyed by using a doorway as a panel edge³⁷.

A fourth element is *expressive anatomy*. Eisner³⁸ considers the human form the most universal image in the arsenal of the comics artist, citing its historical importance in culture from ancient cave paintings and hieroglyphics to professional acting to the art of deciphering body language in pop psychology. Gestures and postures are meaningful the world over, and facial expression in particular is a “window to the mind,” or indicator of personality³⁹. To prove his point, Eisner⁴⁰ provides a detailed analysis of a short artistic exercise in which a ghetto denizen – sporting a headband and shabby clothing – enacts scenes from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* on a rooftop in New York. Despite the unusual combination of Shakespearean language and ghetto atmosphere, emotions are genuinely rendered through the character’s gestures, postures, and facial expressions. The essence of *Hamlet* is retained.

A fifth and final element is *writing*. This encompasses not just the production of words, but more importantly, the bigger picture of crea-

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 90.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 80.

³⁶ Ibidem, pp. 45–46.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 47.

³⁸ Ibidem, pp. 100–103.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 109.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, pp. 112–121.

tive authorship: idea conception, image arrangement, sequence construction, and dialogue composition⁴¹. In view of this expanded definition, Eisner⁴² notes,

[...] there is therefore no choice (in fairness to the art form itself) but to recognize the primacy of the writing. In doing so, however, one must then immediately acknowledge that in a perfect (or pure) configuration the writer and the artist should be embodied in the same person. The writing (or the writer) must be in control to the very end.

In actual practice, however, comic book production may entail the collaboration of writers, pencillers, inkers, letterers, and colorists. If the writer and artist were different people, the process may follow two steps: first, scriptwriting (which lays down the story idea, narrative, and dialogue, and possibly some artistic direction); and second, the artist's interpretation of the script. Despite not being the writer herself, the artist may deviate from the script and take a hand in storytelling. For example, she may choose to omit narrative that can be demonstrated visually, or she may enlarge a sequence of panels in the service of timing⁴³.

Talking points for an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art

There are several areas in the multidisciplinary field of comics studies that are of special interest to the hermeneutical phenomenologist. The studies I cite below come from diverse disciplines such as autobiography studies (on comics and the autobiographical subject), cognitive science (on comics and theory of mind), and sociology (on comics and popular cultural memory). Comics studies encompasses a vast amount of literature and the theories I present here have been selected on the basis of their relevance to certain aspects of Ricoeur's method. My aim is to trace the intersections between the unique features of comics and the intersubjective meanings that can be derived from historical lived ex-

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 122.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 127.

⁴³ Ibidem, pp. 132-133.

perience – i.e. the main concern of hermeneutical phenomenology. I end with a list of critical questions to ask toward a Ricoeurian interpretation of sequential art.

El Rafaie's⁴⁴ work on the autobiographical subject of graphic memoirs (i.e. autobiographical comics) resonates with Ricoeur's hermeneutic critique of phenomenology. Autobiographical comics first proliferated via the underground comix movement of the 1960s, which was conducive to "confessionals" that addressed all manner of taboo subjects⁴⁵. This comics genre is characterized by serious or heavy themes drawn from real life; a highly stylized autobiographical "I"⁴⁶; and the absence of a clear boundary between memory and fiction. In her exhaustive study, El Rafaie lists three theses about how comics artists produce the "I" of graphic memoirs. These involve (1) embodiment, (2) temporality, and (3) authenticity:

[...] the requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one's self necessarily involves an intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity, as well as with the sociocultural models underpinning body image. The formal tensions that exist in the comics medium – between words and images, and between sequence and layout, for instance – offer memoirists many new ways of representing their experience of temporality, their memories of past events, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Furthermore, autobiographical comics creators can draw on the close association in Western culture between seeing and believing in order to persuade readers of the truthful, sincere nature of their stories⁴⁷.

In underscoring shifting modes of embodiment in the graphic representation of the self in comics, El Rafaie's analysis echoes Ricoeur's caveat that self-knowledge, from the point of view of hermeneutical phenomenology, remains doubtful. The distanciation between the narrating and narrated selves occurs through the artist's graphic interpretation of her own changing body – an hermeneutics of body image, if you will. Meanwhile, El Rafaie's observations about the unique way that the comics medium allows the memoirist to render past, present, and future affirm the

⁴⁴ E. El Rafaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*, Jacson 2012.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 36.

⁴⁶ M.A. Chaney, "Introduction: Graphic subjects", [in:] *Critical essays on autobiography and graphic novels*, ed. M.A. Chaney, Wisconsin 2011, PDF e-book, p. 7.

⁴⁷ E. El Rafaie, op. cit. p. 4.

phenomenological description of time offered by Merleau-Ponty and discussed by Ricoeur. Such a phenomenology of time indicates a movement toward historicity. This is evident as the graphic memoir, an account of its subject's unique experience of temporality, itself becomes an artifact or text of history and is eventually liberated from authorial intention. Finally, El Rifaie's conclusion about authenticity recalls Ricoeur's rejection of the direct intuition of essences in phenomenology. Authenticity in comics hinges on the principle that believing someone's story entails seeing the facts for oneself, for example through drawn images. But the images are not the things themselves. In place of direct intuition, Ricoeur suggests that there is always a textual mediation – e.g. the text of comics – between consciousness and meaning.

Another study, Zunshine's⁴⁸ work on the various ways that comics presume and cater to the viewer's instinct for mind-reading, is relevant to hermeneutical phenomenology. Mind-reading here does not pertain to psychic ability, but to the theory of mind, i.e. a principle in cognitive science. The nature of the human mind is such that it assumes or imagines a consciousness similar to its own when confronted with the behaviors and activities of others. Zunshine⁴⁹ writes that it is the theory of mind that makes our pleasure possible in various cultural activities, such as reading novels, watching ballet, attending the theater, participating in team sports, and – last but not least – viewing graphic narratives (Zunshine's terminology for comics). Studies show that someone who has little to no theory of mind, such as a sufferer of Asperger's Syndrome, cannot appreciate complex narratives involving social situations, i.e. texts that demand a high level of "sociocognitive complexity"⁵⁰. For example, appreciating what's at stake in the plot of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a classic novel of manners, requires an awareness of subtext. Subtext is not immediately discernible in the literal content of characters' conversations or in the causal relations between events in the story. To truly understand a work like *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader must first attribute feelings, desires, aspirations, and the like to the main characters, even and especially if the story is not told from these characters' point of view.

⁴⁸ L. Zunshine, "What To Expect When You Pick Up A Graphic Novel", *Substance: A Review Of Theory & Literary Criticism*, 2011, 40.1. Literary Reference Center. Web. 25 Dec. 2014.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 116.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 118.

Fiction, and graphic novels in particular, typically deal with third-level sociocognitive complexity or higher⁵¹. In her analysis of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Tragicomic*, Zunshine⁵² identifies several levels of complexity: the self trying to read other characters' minds (first level), as narrated by the author or comics artist (second level), who also reflects upon the scene as a memory from the perspective of the present, i.e. the time of writing (third level). Graphic narratives or comics are distinctive in their relationship with the theory of mind, because they are

artifacts that coordinate text and images so that the information about people's feelings that we get from looking at their body language elaborates, contradicts, or otherwise complicates the verbal description of their feelings.⁵³

Thus, a special way of reading or interpreting comics is in order, and hermeneutical phenomenology – in light of Zunshine's insights about the theory of mind – may be the most appropriate method. Hermeneutical phenomenology shares with cognitive science an anti-solipsistic stance. It presumes intersubjectivity given the nature of consciousness as an activity that is always other-orientated; or, in Ricoeur's hermeneutical reading of Husserl, consciousness is always meaning-oriented. In the phenomenological reduction, the question of existence is bracketed, thereby dissolving the problem of skepticism (about the world, about other minds). Hermeneutical phenomenology goes one step further and *interprets* the existence of other people through engagement with texts. An hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art therefore takes heed of the sociocognitive complexity involved in understanding the motivations of characters, which may entail careful attention to the subtext of word-image juxtapositions.

A final study that is relevant to a Ricoeurian interpretation of sequential art is Kukkonen's⁵⁴ work on the relationship between comics and popular cultural memory. The study takes off from Jan Assman's

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 120.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 121.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 116.

⁵⁴ K. Kukkonen, "Popular Cultural Memory: Comics, Communities And Context Knowledge", *NORDICOM Review*, 2008, 29.2, pp. 261–273. Communication & Mass Media Complete. Web. 25 Dec. 2014.

idea of collective memory, which includes (1) the communicative memory of living people, and (2) cultural memory which is embedded farther back in history. The idea of cultural memory is extended to *popular* cultural memory in relation to comics. Popular cultural memory has three dimensions, namely: the social, which pertains to the audience; the material, which refers to media texts; and the mental, which relates to codes and conventions. These dimensions, taken together, account for the ways in which identity is concretized over time, as in the case of fan communities; as well as the capacity of certain narratives to be constantly reconstructed, as in the case of the many versions of fairy tales⁵⁵.

The study contributes to a new understanding of comics in two ways. First, it shows how audience communities are created through a globalized and intercultural process of media consumption, so that, for example, the appreciation of samurai fiction for is no longer limited to Japanese readers⁵⁶. Second, it delineates the interaction between text and context knowledge, as in the case of Hansel's story from the graphic novel series *Fables* by Bill Willingham. Here, the character of Hansel appears in 17th-century America as a serial killer in Puritan garb. Images exert a special "power of appeal" on memory, eliciting remembrance of earlier texts⁵⁷. This is why the appearance of a familiar character in an iconic costume has an instant impact. The context knowledge of the reader is derived from membership in an audience community that has been exposed to various iterations of "Hansel and Gretel," as well as history lessons about witch persecutions in New England.

The significance of the cultural dimension of lived experience is a key assumption of hermeneutical phenomenology. Ricoeur's innovation on Husserl is to stress the interpretative –as opposed to purely descriptive – role of phenomenology in making sense of experience. Historical interpretation takes the place of universal description, although nothing new is created *ex-nihilo*. This is because texts, in the form of, for instance, Kukkonen's "popular cultural memory," predate the individual reader and shape her context knowledge.

The foregoing survey of relevant literature from comics studies reveals three main points of intersection between sequential art and hermeneutical phenomenology. The first concerns the narrative construc-

⁵⁵ Ibidem, pp. 261–264.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 265.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 264.

tion of the autobiographical subject, or how comics reveals the ontology of the self who tells the story. (While this aspect serves the interpretation of the graphic memoir, it is also applicable to comics generally, inasmuch as comics writers and artists bring their autobiographical selves into their work, to varying degrees.) The second concerns the way that comics situates the story of the individual against her cultural and historical contexts. The third concerns the portrayal of intersubjectivity as integral to meaning and action in comics. To flesh out a Ricoeurian method of reading comics, I will set Eisner's five formal elements of comics against these two axes of interpretative criteria. The matrix below summarizes the sorts of critical questions we may ask toward an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art:

Formal elements	Axis of autobiography	Axis of intersubjectivity	Axis of history and popular culture
Imagery	Are there any icons, shapes, or symbols used recurrently to signify the narrating self? How do such imagery convey the narrator's representation of her body? How is a history of the self rendered through familiar icons, shapes, or symbols? How do these contribute to the authenticity of the narrator's testimony?	What iconic shapes, symbols, or images are put to use in portraying the interaction between characters? Are word-images (e.g. postcards, missives, posters, onomatopoeic words, etc.) employed in illustrating relationship dynamics? What familiar body postures or shapes derived from ancient symbols are depicted to convey different types of social relationships?	What sociocultural contexts do familiar icons, symbols, and signs evoke? Are any of them specific to a genre or to a community? What changes, if any, occur in these familiar images over different historical periods? How do the artist's background and identity (race, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, religion, etc.) influence, if at all, his or her artistic style?

Formal elements	Axis of autobiography	Axis of intersubjectivity	Axis of history and popular culture
Timing	How do the changes in the narrator's body image convey duration? What formal devices are used to indicate the protagonist's experience of time? Are certain scenes extended or compressed in terms of their significance to the storyteller? How does timing in the narrative relate to the truthfulness of the account?	How are characters' changing perceptions of themselves and of one another depicted over time? How are the characters' experience of duration – interminable, slow, quick, lightning-fast, etc. – shown with respect to their various interactions? How are changes in the self and one's perception of others conveyed through introspection, imagination, and anticipation?	What conventions specific to the sociocultural setting of the story affect the depiction of duration? How is historical time rendered in the page? Are there any historical events referenced, and if so, how do they affect the timing of the narrative?
Framing	What experiences of the author loom large as a result of formal choices in framing? How is the narrator's body image portrayed variously in scenes framed as a recollection, fantasy, or anticipation? How is framing used in the service of authenticity in storytelling? Are hallucinations and false or unreliable accounts marked in the choice of panel border style?	How are the characters' perceptions of each other and of themselves framed in the story? Are any scenes framed as a character's thought, memory, speculation, fantasy, narration, etc.? How do the size, shape, and size of the individual panels relate to the status or situation of each character?	Are there any historical or culturally specific events, persons, or ideas that are focused on or shown through distinctive paneling devices? How does the type or style of panel borders relate to the social and historical setting? What culturally specific characteristics or concepts are evoked by the utilization of the page as a meta-panel? What cultural or social messages, if any, predominate in splash pages?

Formal elements	Axis of autobiography	Axis of intersubjectivity	Axis of history and popular culture
Expressive anatomy	What type of body image is revealed by the narrator's facial expressions, affectations, movements, and the like? How does the represented body change over time? What is the degree of actual resemblance between the narrator-character and the author-narrator? What does this signify in terms of the author's self-representation?	How do the characters' facial expressions, gestures, and body postures reveal how they feel about themselves and others? Do the characters' physical appearances vary based on point of view? How are the physical attributes of characters depicted in remembrance, introspection, fantasy, or imagination? Are the characters shown to communicate through body, in addition to verbal, language? If so, what does this body language say about the nature of their relationships?	What messages about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity are conveyed by the portrayal of the body? What ideological assumptions, if any, are conveyed or critiqued through the depiction of facial expressions, gestures, body postures, and body shapes? Are there any cultural stereotypes that are reinforced or debunked?
Writing	What can be deduced about the protagonist or narrator based on the tone or style of storytelling in the captions? How does dialogue contribute to the representation of the narrator's self? Is the story presented as an authentic testimony or otherwise?	What can be deduced about the characters' relationships with each other through the caption narration and dialogue? What main theme or idea is offered about self and other? Is the story pessimistic or optimistic about human relationships?	What central theme, issue, or argument is presented in the story? How is it related to the historical and cultural contexts of the work? Do the captions and dialogue serve as a historical or cultural critique? How does creative collaboration affect the central theme, idea, or argument?

The story of Gen

Barefoot Gen: A Story of Hiroshima by Keiji Nakazawa is a 10-volume *shōnen* manga series chronicling the life of a boy, Gen Nakaoka, who sur-

vives the bombing of Hiroshima. His name alludes to “the basic composition of humanity”; it is also the first half of the Japanese word *genso*, which means chemical element⁵⁸. The series narrates not just Gen’s experiences on the day of the bombing and its immediate aftermath, but also how he and his remaining family coped in the succeeding years as *hibakusha*, or literally, “those who were bombed”⁵⁹.

Although it is a work of fiction, *Barefoot Gen* is inspired by real life events. Nakazawa was six years old on the morning of August 6, 1945, the day that the American B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped a 10,000-pound uranium bomb over Hiroshima, Japan. He was at school, and his proximity to a wall which collapsed and sheltered him from the worst of the blast saved his life⁶⁰. Unfortunately his father, younger brother, and older sister were to die under the rubble of their house. His pregnant mother survived, and heard the dying screams of her husband and son as she failed to save them from the firestorm that eventually engulfed their home. Nakazawa’s other brother, who had been evacuated out of town, also survived. His mother gave birth later that day, to a newborn girl who will die from starvation in a month’s time.

Decades later when he was a successful manga artist, Nakazawa was moved to share his bomb experience after his mother died. The triggering event was his enraged discovery, upon her cremation, that there was very little bone left in her remains. Most of it had disintegrated over the years as a result of radiation⁶¹. Thereafter, he began drawing “atomic bomb manga.” His first attempt was a single-issue noir detective story entitled “Pelted by Black Rain,” published in 1967⁶². Works dealing with other topics followed this, and he returned to the subject in 1972 with a single-issue nonfiction work, “I Saw It,” which was part of an autobiographical series by manga artists⁶³. Thus, by the time the first issue

⁵⁸ K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, ed. and trans. R.H. Minear, London 2010.

⁵⁹ L. Cameron, M. Miyoshi, “Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the World Sixty Years Later”, *Virginia Quarterly Review* 81, Fall 2005, no. 4, p. 27. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost [accessed: 7.05.2015].

⁶⁰ K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, op. cit., p. 34.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 154.

⁶³ K. Takayuki, “*Barefoot Gen* and ‘A-Bomb Literature’: Re-recollections of the Nuclear Experience”, trans. Nele Noppe, [in:] *Comics Worlds and the Worlds of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale (series Global Manga Studies, vol. 1)*, ed. Jacqueline Berndt,

of *Barefoot Gen* was published in *Shōnen Jump* magazine in June 1973⁶⁴, the artist had already revealed traces of his testimonial narrative in previous works.

Barefoot Gen may be divided into two parts: The first follows the Nakaoka family's struggles in prewar and wartime Hiroshima and how some of them survived the bombing and its aftermath; the second shows an older Gen reconciling himself to the deaths of his loved ones and leaving Hiroshima for Tokyo to become a professional cartoonist⁶⁵. Only the first four volumes of the collected series were originally serialized in *Shōnen Jump*; the rest were published in public education magazines⁶⁶.

Nakazawa's story achieved considerable popularity, spawning a TV cartoon series, a live action film, and an animated film⁶⁷. However, it was not until the 1990s that it gained widespread recognition outside Japan, after the English translation work initiated by Project Gen. This volunteer organization was founded in 1976 "as a result of an encounter between Japanese participants in the Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice and Americans eager to learn about *hibakusha* experience"⁶⁸. Nakazawa's masterpiece was both a harrowing testimony by an atom bomb survivor and a powerful argument for peace. According to Szasz and Takechi,

Canada 2010, p. 253, [online] <http://imrc.jp/2010/09/26/20100924Comics%20Worlds%20and%20the%20World%20of%20Comics.pdf> [accessed: 7.05.2015].

⁶⁴ K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, op. cit., p. 163.

⁶⁵ F.M. Szasz, I. Takechi, "Atomic heroes and atomic monsters: American and Japanese cartoonists confront the onset of the nuclear age, 1945–80", *The Historian*, 2007, 4, p. 748. Academic OneFile, EBSCOhost [accessed: 7.05.2015].

⁶⁶ T. Lamarre, "Manga Bomb: Between the Lines of *Barefoot Gen*", [in:] *Comics Worlds and the Worlds of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale (series Global Manga Studies, vol. 1)*, ed. J. Berndt, Canada 2010, p. 265, [online] <http://imrc.jp/2010/09/26/20100924Comics%20Worlds%20and%20the%20World%20of%20Comics.pdf> [accessed: 7.05.2015].

⁶⁷ R.H. Minear, "Introduction", [in:] *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, ed. and trans. R.H. Minear. London 2010, p. viii.

⁶⁸ Ch. Hong, "Flashforward Democracy: American Exceptionalism and the Atomic Bomb in *Barefoot Gen*", [in:] *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2009, p. 127. JSTOR Journals, EBSCOhost [accessed: 7.05.2015].

Excluding Art Spiegelman's two-volume cartoon story of the holocaust, *Maus* – which was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992 – no American comic book publisher has produced any counterpart to *Barefoot Gen*⁶⁹.

In 2010, the artist's prose autobiography, interspersed with new illustrations and excerpts from *Barefoot Gen*, was published. It revealed striking similarities between his own life and the scenes dramatized in the fictional manga. At the end of the book, Nakazawa⁷⁰ expressed his plans to travel to places such as Chernobyl, Nevada and Three Mile Island, Bikini Island, Auschwitz, and Nanjing, and to write about his experiences in "further installments" of *Barefoot Gen*. Unfortunately, cataract forced him to cancel this project in 2009⁷¹. He died from complications due to lung cancer on December 19, 2012.

An hermeneutical phenomenology of *Barefoot Gen*

In this section, I will be applying the critical questions I identified earlier, which represent the intersection between the formal elements of comics according to Eisner⁷² and the key features of Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology. I hope to present a critical reflection on Nakazawa's manga that is based on a new theory of comics interpretation, one that emphasizes the autobiographical, cultural and historical, and intersubjective dimensions of lived experience.

I group my remarks into three main themes: (1) resilience and re-birth through a proverbial baptism of fire; (2) the evils of war and militarism; and (3) the human being's capacity for violence against others, including the other side of that capacity – unconditional love.

The first theme is clearly expressed by the symbol of wheat, which appears on the first page (see figure 1). Gen, his younger brother Shinji, and his father are standing over the family's small field of wheat months before the bombing of Hiroshima. The captions of the first two panels read,

⁶⁹ F.M. Szasz, I. Takechi, op. cit., p. 750.

⁷⁰ K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, op. cit., pp. 171–172.

⁷¹ "Barefoot Gen's Nakazawa Drops Sequel Due to Cataract", *Anime News Network*, 2009, [online] <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2009-09-15/barefoot-gen-nakazawa-drops-sequel-due-to-cataract> [accessed: 7.05.2015].

⁷² W. Eisner, op. cit.

Wheat pushes its shoots up through the winter frost, only to be stepped on again and again. The trampled wheat sends strong roots into the earth, endures frost, wind and snow, grows straight and tall and one day bears fruit.⁷³

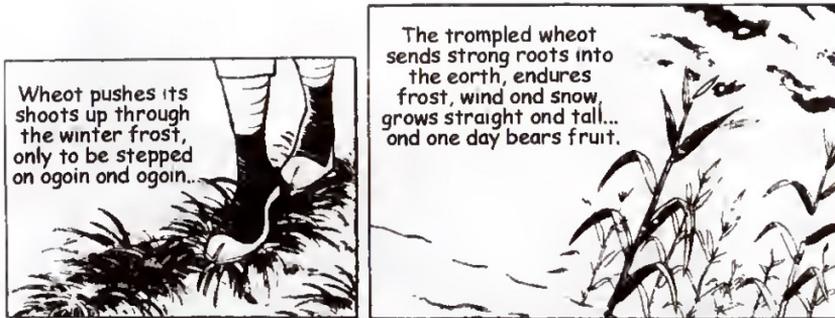


Figure 1. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

The first panel shows a pair of child's feet treading on young shoots of wheat; this is followed by an image of rows of wheat stalks standing tall, shown from the perspective of the ground, emphasizing their height and solidity. Later in the story, because of Gen's father's vocal criticism of the war effort, the Nakaokas are ostracized as traitors in their village, and their wheat field is vandalized⁷⁴. But although it takes years to grow again, the wheat does reappear, and is in fact one of the last images in the closing pages of the last volume.

Like this hardy plant, the Japanese before, during, and after World War II also endured enormous violence and destruction, but emerged from the experience renewed. Japan's military ambitions were crushed and their nation humbled when American atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Hiroshima alone, more than 140,000 people perished and 70,000 buildings leveled. An area of four square miles from the epicenter of the detonation was almost completely obliterated. But fifty years after, during the height of *Barefoot Gen's* international

⁷³ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1, with an Introduction by A. Spiegelman, San Francisco 2004, p. 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

popularity, Hiroshima was a thriving city once more and it had become an advocate of global peace and nuclear disarmament⁷⁵.

Indeed, *Barefoot Gen* is the story not just of the individual characters, but also of the Japanese people themselves. Japan is known as the land of the rising sun, its flag featuring a red circle on a white background. This association is emphasized by the sun as a dominant symbol, which appears more than twenty times in the first two volumes alone. Lamarre considers this image as evidence of *Barefoot Gen*'s darker undertones, in direct opposition to the characters' "cuteness," an influence of Osamu Tezuka's Disney-like style:

The darker modalities associated with gekiga appear... in the recurrent image of the sun that punctuates the manga without reference to the story's actions or characters' emotions. The sun is a thoroughly perplexing evocation of the power of the bomb, the emperor (his mythic status of descendent of the sun goddess), the passage of time, and the fecundity and brutality of the natural world, all of which collectively perplex the manga in their figural coincidence⁷⁶.

The sun tells the reader whether it is morning, noon, late afternoon, or dusk. Its ubiquity and highly variable appearance heighten the sense that days are passing quickly. Sometimes, it underscores the interminable hardships that the characters are going through. At other times the disc hangs ominously in the sky, usually preceding a cataclysmic event in the story.

In some places it evokes hope and exuberance, as in a two-page spread (figure 2) where Gen, having found some food during the aftermath of the bombing, boards a riverboat on his way back to his mother and newborn sister⁷⁷. The sun is depicted in an unusual way here, large, shaded, and half-covered by dark clouds. At the center of the spread is Gen aboard the boat, which is bobbing on churning waters. The sun, about to set, glows in the upper right corner of the page while its rays extend to the horizon, toward Gen. The triumphant tone of this illustration is all the more striking as the previous page shows Gen's depart-

⁷⁵ T. Gup, "Up from Ground Zero: Hiroshima", *National Geographic* 188, August 1995, 2, pp. 82-92.

⁷⁶ T. Lamarre, op. cit., p. 291.

⁷⁷ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, with an Introduction by A. Spiegelman, San Francisco 2004, p. 125.

ing feet leaving imprints on the shore, which is strewn with skeletal remains. In spite of the evidence of death that he walks through, he sails across the river under the day's last defiant light.

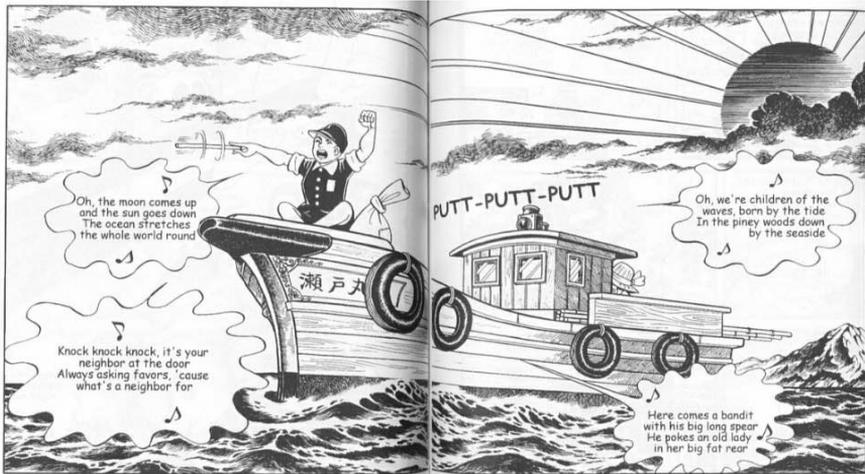


Figure 2. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

Apart from the wheat and the sun, another important symbol of resilience and rebirth is the element of fire. The immense heat released by the bomb caused conflagrations, which razed everyone and everything that were left. The following historical account describes hell on earth:

The bomb exploded over the city with a brilliant flash of purple light, followed by a deafening blast and a powerful shock wave that heated the air as it expanded. A searing fireball eventually enveloped the area around ground zero, temperatures rose to approximate those on the surface of the sun, and a giant mushroom cloud roiled up from the city like an angry gray ghost.⁷⁸

In *Barefoot Gen*, there are horrific splash pages of a burning horse⁷⁹ and of victims running from the flames, while the heads and limbs of people pinned under their houses are shown in the foreground⁸⁰.

⁷⁸ M.J. Hogan, "Hiroshima in History and Memory: An Introduction", [in:] *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. M.J. Hogan. New York 1999, p. 1.

⁷⁹ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 256.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

These are not the only places in the story where fire appears prominently. In the second volume, Gen helps his neighbor, Mr. Pak, cremate the latter's father. Gen discovers that the human body, as it goes up in flames, curls up like fish on a grill⁸¹. A few pages later, he strikes out for the location of his old house in order to retrieve the bones of his father, brother, and sister. As he digs through the charred ruins, he relives their last moments, trapped and screaming for help as fire consumed them. Eventually, Gen finds and gathers their bones and skulls. Testimonies like Nakazawa's – as they could only have been made by those who lived through fire, like the fabled phoenix – attest to the paradoxical nature of this element as the force of both destruction and recreation. Fittingly, the first volume ends with the image of Gen's newborn sister (figure 3) – delivered on the day of the bombing – being held up triumphantly against a backdrop of fire and smoke⁸².

⁸¹ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 173.

⁸² K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 284.



Figure 3. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

The second theme, the evils of war and militarism, is explicitly conveyed through narration and dialogue. The story is a forceful critique of the people's conformity to the Japanese imperial system and its single-minded appetite for war. In the opening chapter of the first volume, Gen's father argues with the trainer during a civilians' spear drill. Before walking out, he states,

America has more resources than Japan does. A small country like Japan can only survive by foreign trade. We should keep peace with the rest of the world. Japan has no business fighting a war! The military was misled by the

rich. They started the war to grab resources by force, and drew us all in... You're all sick with war fever! This war is wrong!⁸³

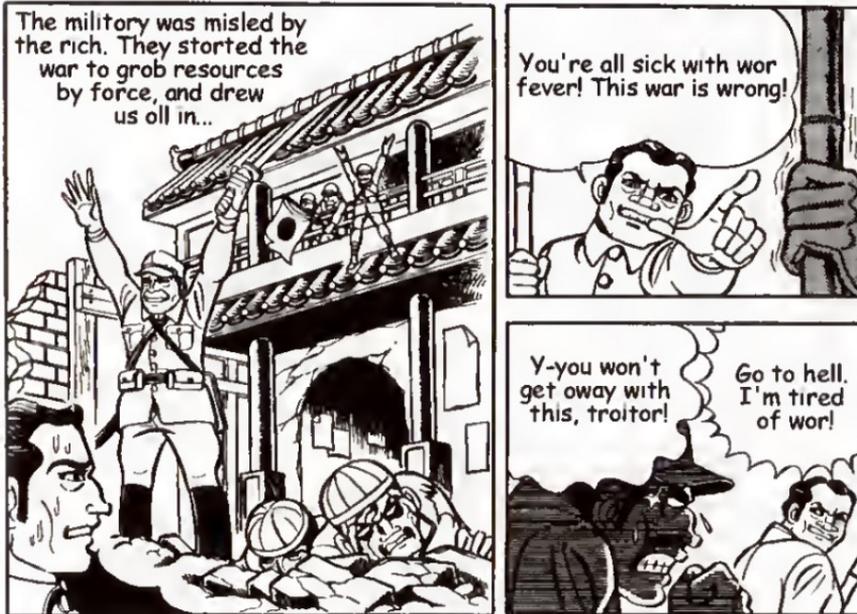


Figure 4. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

This ideological thesis permeates the first volume and is validated in several ways. The first is through the persecution of Gen's family in their community, especially after his father is arrested as a political dissenter. The pernicious groupthink that Gen's father has denounced becomes evident as storekeepers refuse to sell them food, other children taunt Gen and his siblings for being traitors, and Gen's sister is falsely accused of theft at school. Another way in which the anti-war message is reinforced is through the story of Gen's older brother, Koji, who survives to join the Japanese navy. However, at the naval base, he encounters a belligerent drunk – a senior officer who later reveals that he is condemned to die as a kamikaze pilot, a fate he is dreading. A few pages later, as Koji arrives at a training center, the narration reads,

⁸³ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 13.

The prep pilot courses held at Naval Air Corps bases throughout Japan recruited boys age 15 to 17 who dreamed of flying and wearing the smart seven-button uniform. As the war neared its end, each class boasted nearly 3,000 volunteers. Used like so many human bullets, their young lives were snuffed out one after the other.⁸⁴

But the manga's most obvious argument against war is the portrayal of its cumulative effect on the populace: Gen and his siblings are depicted as constantly starving. People live in fear of air raids. And of course, the bombing of Hiroshima unleashes unimaginable suffering on those who have not been killed instantly in the explosion. These hardships related to the nuclear experience are at the heart of Nakazawa's work as a *hibakusha* testimony.

The humanist and pacifist message of *Barefoot Gen*, however, is criticized by Hong⁸⁵ as being infected with "American exceptionalism," or an implicit support for "an American-sponsored democracy-to-come premised on US military intervention." The manga was produced more than three decades after the conclusion of World War II, long after the Japanese themselves had denounced their former leaders and blamed them for their hardships. Thus, the critical tone of the story, set at a time before this national attitude fully crystallized, exemplified an anachronistic "flashforward reading" of the bombing as a necessary evil⁸⁶. Moreover, the manga as a medium for mass entertainment transformed the "testimonial comics image" into a "prosthetic memory" that erased historical differences and failed to truly take the US to task for its atomic bombing of Japan⁸⁷.

I disagree with Hong's reading for two reasons. The first is that *Barefoot Gen* should be read in the context of its predecessor, "Pelted by Black Rain" (1966), whose hero, Jin, is an assassin targeting Americans who are trading weapons in the black market. According to Szasz and Takechi⁸⁸, this manga "presages all the qualities that would later go into *Barefoot Gen*, and its no-holds-barred accusations against the Americans are boldly stated." Situating the story in terms of Nakazawa's atomic bomb manga oeuvre shows that it condemns all those responsible for

⁸⁴ Ibidem, p. 162.

⁸⁵ Ch. Hong, op. cit., p. 128.

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 139.

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 145.

⁸⁸ F.M. Szasz, I. Takechi, op. cit., p. 747.

any possible nuclear apocalypse, and the US is not an exception. Second, if *Barefoot Gen* is read in relation to the literature of war manga in Japan, its subversive message becomes more conspicuous. The genre of war manga in Japan may be broadly divided into two periods: the late 1950s to the late 1960s, characterized by a hegemonic narrative that valorized Japan's military past; and the late 1960s to late 1970s, which saw an increasingly critical attitude toward the heroic war narrative, re-envisioning the war years as disastrous⁸⁹. *Barefoot Gen* falls squarely into the latter, and its denunciation of Japanese militarism and the imperial system may not be the product of an incipient "American exceptionalism" so much as of historical circumstances.

To reduce the political message of the story to a simplistic allegiance to the democratic values of a mightier nation is to obscure the uniqueness and complexity of *Barefoot Gen*, a testimonial manga that challenges pat dualisms about responsibility for war. It takes an unflinching look at the misery of kamikaze pilots, long dismissed as brainwashed drones through a Western lens; the social persecution of anybody critical of the imperial system; and the dehumanizing treatment of forced laborers from Korea. Japan's hands are not clean, indeed. On the other hand, the atomic bomb itself, created by American scientists and dropped by an American plane on military personnel and civilians alike, is a reflection of the source nation's unmitigated power and aggression. It unleashed a violence directed at military personnel and civilians alike, Japanese and non-Japanese, including American prisoners of war. After Gen and Shinji paint big black P's on the roof of their house, which they have noticed the American POWs doing with their buildings, Gen says, "Now our house won't get hit by enemy planes!"⁹⁰. The reader gets a sense of the futility of this effort. After all, it is known that the bomb will obliterate practically all of Hiroshima and kill or severely injure everyone on it.

This brings us to the third and last theme: the human being's capacity for violence against others (as well as its anti-thesis, unconditional love). *Barefoot Gen* is unquestionably a violent story and a story about violence, on both facetious and fundamental levels. On one hand, the casual way that characters hit, slap, shove, wrestle, stab at, bite, or otherwise try to physically harm others may be easily explained by the conven-

⁸⁹ E. Nakar, "Framing Manga: On Narratives of the Second World War in Japanese Manga, 1957-1977", [in:] *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. M.W. MacWilliams. New York 2008, pp. 178-191.

⁹⁰ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 178.

tions of *shōnen* manga, a genre aimed at young boys and which frequently feature “fascination for war-related items,” “the striking prevalence of depictions of violence,” and “the main characters’ resolute fighting for their beliefs”⁹¹. Indeed, the slapstick quality of the many instances of abuse – which occurs as frequently between intimates as between strangers – is a familiar trope in boys’ manga and anime, such as *Dragon Ball*, *Slam Dunk*, and *Naruto*, to name a few. On the other hand, *Barefoot Gen* also depicts a form of violence that manifests itself in technological and institutional ways. I find this of more interest from an hermeneutic phenomenological point of view.

An overt example is the use of the atomic bomb itself against the unsuspecting population of Hiroshima – a historical event depicted in a work of fiction with considerable testimonial authority. Nakazawa⁹² brings home the human toll of this catastrophe by juxtaposing long views of depopulated images delineated with clinical precision (a fleet of bombers planes preparing for flight, Enola Gay cruising over the city and dropping “Little Boy,” the resulting cloud – see figure 5), and stark images of personal suffering (people with melted faces and skin, or impaled by tiny glass shards; the streets strewn with debris). This parade of grotesqueries continues in the second volume as Nakazawa⁹³ depicts rotting corpses floating in the river, their bellies popping open with putrid gas; maggots hatching from inside open wounds; people being burned alive under the ruins of their houses. Such images challenge any abstract rationalization of the use of the atomic bomb under any circumstances.

Aside from its incarnation through nuclear weaponry, this dehumanizing violence also occurs through the mechanism of social institutions such as the military state and the culture of deification that revolves around the Emperor. The line between individual choice and social coercion is blurred, as when an entire village turns against its members who are perceived as traitors⁹⁴; young boys are pressured into sacrificing their lives for the military cause⁹⁵; and the Japanese are encour-

⁹¹ T. Lamarre, op. cit., p. 265, quoting Itō and Omote.

⁹² K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., pp. 241–258.

⁹³ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 50.

⁹⁴ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., pp. 14–58.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 96–99.

aged to kill themselves rather than surrender to the occupying army⁹⁶. Thoughtless hatred, borne of constant sociocultural reinforcement, is directed not just against critics of the war but also and especially against American prisoners. The Japanese pelt the latter with stones through their barbed wire enclosure, accusing them of having killed their family members. As Gen and his father witness this, the parent counsels the child, “Those Americans have families just like we do. War just makes people hate each other, kill each other...”⁹⁷. After the American prisoners are themselves destroyed by the bomb, villagers curse and throw stones at a burnt American corpse⁹⁸.

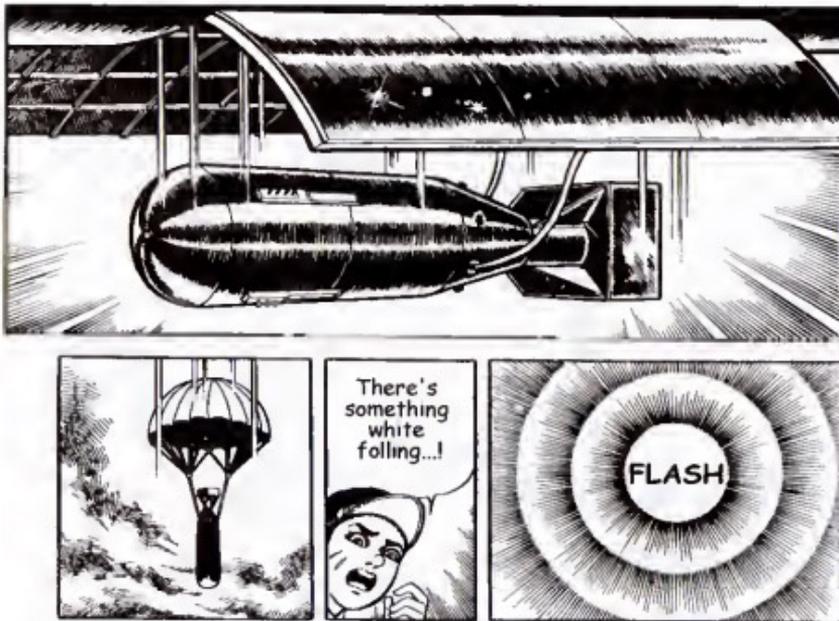


Figure 5. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

This methodical erasure of the other, the metaphysical violence against his or her personhood – which, philosophically, also goes by the name of “evil” – is attributed to the logic of war. Counterbalancing this, however, are instances of one character reaching out to others in what

⁹⁶ Ibidem, pp. 108–109.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 166–167.

⁹⁸ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 22–23.

can only be described as unconditional love. Gen's father tearfully salutes his son Koji even as the latter leaves to serve in a war that the father detests⁹⁹; Mr. Pak, the Nakaokas' Korean neighbor, give them money for food when he himself is no better off¹⁰⁰; Gen gifts Shinji with a prized toy battleship despite their personal differences¹⁰¹; and Gen tries to convince Natsue – a girl whose face is horribly disfigured by the blast – to keep on living¹⁰². The message seems to be that, even in the face of the most inconceivable suffering and evil, humankind is not without redemption. This notion brings the foregoing reflections to a full circle with *Barefoot Gen's* iconic image of the wheat – a main source of staple food for the Japanese – the symbol of revitalization through adversity.

Conclusion

In this study, I have endeavored to show that a philosophical treatment of comics, a medium that has reached the peak of its maturity, has the potential to offer us new ways of thinking about ourselves and our relationship with the world. There have been many significant philosophical studies of comics, aiming primarily to (1) provide a philosophical discussion of the subject matter of comics; (2) apply philosophical concepts to narratives and themes in comics; (3) show how insights from comics could contribute to existing conversations about traditional philosophical problems; or (4) resolve puzzles related to the comics form by way of conceptual analysis. My special concern has been to outline and substantiate a way of reading sequential art – specifically, comics in its modern form – through Paul Ricoeur's method of hermeneutical phenomenology. To my knowledge, Ricoeur's interpretive method has yet to be applied to works that feature the special interaction of word and image, such as comics.

The framework of reading comics that I have provided relates Ricoeur's method to the formal elements of sequential art as theorized by Will Eisner. In keeping with the linguistic or hermeneutic turn that

⁹⁹ K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 118.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, p. 186.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, pp. 226–241.

¹⁰² K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 65–106.

Ricoeur represents in the phenomenological tradition, I focus on three relevant aspects of comics production and representation: autobiography, intersubjectivity, and history and popular culture. I have identified questions along these axes of interpretation that are relevant to ask in regard to imagery, timing, framing, expressive anatomy, and writing.

Despite its focus on these formal elements, an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art is not reducible to formalist criticism, since it also purports to contribute to our understanding of human existence. On the other hand, it also not reducible to an existentialist reading, especially because existentialist themes in comics – e.g. the self-other relation, death, the meaning (or lack thereof) of life, spirituality or transcendence, and the like – tend to be obvious and self-explanatory. Instead, the method looks into how these specific themes are conveyed through the unique meaning-making of the medium. As it makes use of cultural texts in order to interpret the structures of human consciousness, an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art is also primarily an hermeneutics of comics, a way of interpreting comics through the lens of being.

In regard to Keiji Nakazawa's biographical *Barefoot Gen* manga series, the method may be applied to elucidate on symbolic imagery as wheat, the sun, and fire, as these convey the message of resilience and rebirth through catastrophe. In addition, through the interpretive axis of culture and history as it intersects with the formal element of writing, the reader may appreciate the pacifist message of Nakazawa as a survivor of the atom bomb. This message is an unequivocal rejection of war, embodied in large part by the bomb itself and Japan's own culture of militarism. Since the proximate causes and ideological agenda behind the bombing of Hiroshima are contested issues, the hermeneutical phenomenology has been augmented with historical footnotes. However, a detailed unraveling of the relevant controversies is beyond the scope of the paper, and so it is limited to an analysis of Nakazawa's necessarily subjective presentation of this period in history. Finally, focusing on the axis of intersubjectivity as it intersects with the formal elements of expressive anatomy and narrative, it is possible to identify the ways that *Barefoot Gen* reveals the dual capacity of human beings for violence and unconditional love. The incidents that Nakazawa sketches reveal the fascinating range of human interactions, especially during wartime. The medium of manga showcases this in a particularly effective way through the visual pantomime of expressive anatomy and gesture.

Thus, an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art reveals key insights about the human condition. Among the many possible philosophical treatments of comics, it uniquely pays attention to the meanings that arise from the interaction between the verbal and the visual. Though it is not my concern here, the method can conceivably be applied to other narrative media that combine words and pictures, such as film, television, and theater.

In conclusion, Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology can make unique and specific contributions to the philosophy of sequential art and comics studies more generally, through its best features as a method of interpreting or reading comics. This paper is an attempt to provide a rigorous philosophical approach to the analysis of sequential art that draws from the twin traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. While these traditions have been applied to the visual arts, they are rarely, if at all, brought to bear on comics. As an artistic medium, comics – with its peculiar combination of word and image – has the potential to provide new insights concerning topics that are of special interest to hermeneutes and phenomenologists. These include:

- How the interaction between text and pictures creates meaning;
- How existentialist themes (e.g. death, freedom, intersubjectivity, transcendence, the meaning – or lack thereof – of life, etc.) are communicated in comics form;
- The various ways that the self can be represented in the medium;
- How time is experienced in and through comics;
- How sequential art draws from and intervenes with historical and cultural sources;
- How moments, contexts, situations, time periods, reveries, and other units of experience are framed, broken down, or opened up in comics; and
- How canonical philosophical texts may be put in conversation with popular cultural narratives, which augment, affirm, or argue against the canon.

Existing philosophical analyses of comics focus on the content of the story, which makes the analyses themselves indiscriminate given the many forms that comics narratives can take (motion pictures and novelization, to name a couple of examples). However, there is a need to focus on the specificity of the medium in its interpretation, and hermeneutical phenomenology provides a set of adaptable heuristics to achieve that. While other ways of reading comics are apropos in light of their own ob-

jectives, the method outlined here may be used in conjunction with these other ways. Employing the “Critical questions to ask in an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art” (see Table 1) *is only the starting point*. The answers derived can and should be used to add to, complement, enhance, or even argue against, existing readings. After all, a key strength of Ricoeur’s¹⁰³ interpretive paradigm is its concern with the world’s “unfolding layers of meaning,” which have now taken a pictorial turn. Finally, perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of an hermeneutical phenomenology of the Ricoeurian variety is its focus on the meaning-generating relation between consciousness and the world, as lived in embodied existence. As applied to comics, this approach brings Being down to earth, as it were, at an extremely popular level. It may thus be used in teaching and popularizing philosophy, especially in regard to its more obscure and abstract precincts. Just as anyone can appreciate sequential art, so too can anyone with the willingness to read and understand get into a philosophical frame of mind, or make philosophical inquiries.

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¹⁰³ P. Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and hermeneutics”, op. cit., p. 101.

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