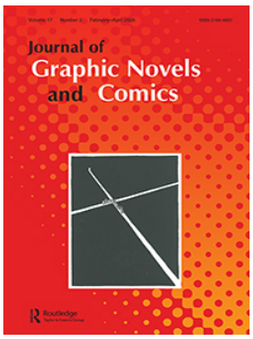

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Transcultural shōjo manga: rethinking the Italian comic series *W.I.T.C.H.* through Heinrich Wölfflin's art-historical comparative methodology

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complexities of defining shōjo manga, a Japanese comics genre for adolescent girls, in a transcultural context by analysing the formal aspects of *W.I.T.C.H.* (2001–2012), an Italian Disney comic series known for its hybridisation of shōjo manga and Western elements. The study achieves this by comparing *W.I.T.C.H.* with its redrawn version by Japanese shōjo manga artist Haruko Lida (2003–2004), who further 'manga-ised' the already 'manga-like' series. The study emerges from Anglophone comics scholarship, contending that while shōjo manga is frequently used to signal 'cultural differences' between Japanese and Western comics, more nuanced approaches to formal analysis are required to account for transcultural works. To this end, the study draws upon Ian Horton and Maggie Gray's application of Heinrich Wölfflin's art-historical comparative methodology to a formal analysis of comics, extending their approach according to the medium's specificities. By comparing two versions of *W.I.T.C.H.*, the study reveals that *W.I.T.C.H.*, despite sharing with its Japanese version shōjo manga page layout techniques, diverges formally in ways that bring plurality and nuance to the genre's definitions. Ultimately, this study argues that shōjo manga is not an exclusive category but a dynamic genre continuously reshaped, expanded, and innovated through transcultural exchange.

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shōjo manga; Heinrich Wölfflin; *W.I.T.C.H.*; transcultural comics research; formal analysis

Introduction

This study explores the complexities of defining shōjo manga, a Japanese comics genre for adolescent girls, in a transcultural context by analysing the formal aspects of *W.I.T.C.H.* (2001–2012), an Italian Disney comic series known for its hybridisation of shōjo manga and Western elements. The study achieves this by comparing *W.I.T.C.H.* with its redrawn version by Japanese shōjo manga artist Haruko Lida (2003–2004), who further 'manga-ised' the already 'manga-like' series' (Pellitteri 2009, 389). Methodologically, the study builds upon Ian Horton and Maggie Gray's recent application of Heinrich Wölfflin's art-historical comparative methodology to a formal analysis of comics

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(Horton and Gray 2022, 59–87), extending their approach by adapting Wölfflin's methodology according to the medium specificities of comics.

The following definitions guide this exploration: 'formal aspects' refer to the visual elements of comics, distinct from narrative and textual content. 'Transcultural' here describes the transgression of cultural borders, with 'culture' encompassing both national identities and broader 'intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development' associated with them (Williams 1976, 80). In this sense, comics cultures involve national contexts where comics creation is practised. Within these cultures, comics genres, such as shōjo manga, represent historically established sets of conventions that generate 'evaluative and interpretive expectations' among audience members (Abell 2012, 77-78). As conventions from different comics cultures interact, expectations shift. In turn, genres are not only preserved but also borrowed and reinvented, thereby underscoring the transcultural nature of comics.

This study emerges from the discourse within Anglophone comics scholarship on shōjo manga. Since the introduction of manga to European and North American markets in the 1980s (Bouissou 2010, 17), scholars have frequently used shōjo manga to signal 'cultural differences' between Japanese and Western comics. Scott McCloud, for instance, asserts that the formal and narrative techniques of shōjo manga are 'distinct from Western mainstream comics' (2006., 220), with two of his eight key 'manga storytelling techniques' specifically linked to the genre (216 & 220). Similarly, Thierry Groensteen highlights the page layouts of shōjo manga, which he claims 'diverge the most emphatically from Western conventions' compared to other manga genres (2011, 57). These observations affirm shōjo manga's significance in what Jaqueline Berndt terms as 'cross-cultural' or transcultural comics research (2010, 5), highlighting its value within Anglophone comics scholarship.

However, existing formal analyses of shōjo manga reveal two pressing limitations. First, the analyses are often cursory, limited to brief mentions within broader studies that sideline a systematic formal examination of shōjo manga (McCloud 2006.; Prough 2010; Schodt 1983, 1996; Toku 2015). A notable exception is Groensteen (2011, 56–63), who provides a focused and detailed comparison of manga and Western comics, though his analysis is explicitly confined to page layout. This gap signals the need for a theoretically grounded formal analysis of shōjo manga that considers page layout as well as other formal elements, to better understand its culturally specific generic markers.

The second limitation lies in the restrictive definition often imposed on shōjo manga when examined through a transcultural lens. Despite occasional counterarguments (Shamoon 2008), shōjo manga is typically framed as a Japanese genre distinguished by 'large eyes, full-body portraits, complex page designs, and free-floating text' to convey emotions and interiority (Takahashi 2008, 128). This narrow characterisation reinforces clear divides between 'Japanese' and 'Western' comics, constraining our understanding of transcultural works, such as *W.I.T.C.H.* This raises a critical question: how can shōjo manga's generic markers be interpreted with greater flexibility and nuance?

To address these gaps, this article leverages Horton and Gray's model, adapting Wölfflin's art-historical methodology to a formal analysis of shōjo manga. Rather than offering an exhaustive survey of shōjo manga's formal characteristics, it focuses on the Italian comic series *W.I.T.C.H.* as a case study in shōjo manga's transcultural formal potential, compared with its Japanese redrawn version. The discussion begins by outlining Wölfflin's

Figure 1. The Last Supper (Leonardo da Vinci, c.1495–1498).

methodology, Horton and Gray's model and the adaptions made for this study. It then introduces the contexts surrounding the creation of *W.I.T.C.H.* and current understandings of its transculturality. Wölfflin's methodology is then employed to compare the Italian and Japanese version of *W.I.T.C.H.*, extending the findings to provide a more nuanced understanding of the Italian version's transculturality. The article concludes by evaluating the limitations and possibilities of Wölfflin's methodology for comics analysis and proposing directions for future research.

Presenting Wölfflin's art historical methodology: five paired concepts

Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), the renowned German Swiss art historian, develops five pairs of contrasting visual concepts in *Principles of Art History* (1950) to distinguish the formal characteristics of Renaissance 'Classic Art' and Baroque. This methodology, recognised as a 'classic' of Western art history (Levy 2020, 2), has resonated across various humanities disciplines, including visual cultural studies (Cronan 2015, cited in; Horton and Gray 2022, 70).[1] The following section outlines Wölfflin's methodology, using Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (Figure 1) and Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (Figure 2) as illustrative examples of Renaissance and Baroque art, supplemented by author-created diagrams for clarity.

Linear versus painterly

Linear

As 'the path of vision and guide of the eye' (Wölfflin 1950, 14), line is 'assigned a superior or equal value to' other pictorial elements such as shading (19). For example, *The Last Supper* can be readily understood through its emphasis on line (Figure 3).

Painterly

Defined by 'the depreciation of line' (19), the painterly approach allows shapes to emerge fluidly, minimising defined boundaries. In *The Night Watch*, the painting resists

Figure 2. The Night Watch (Van Rijn, 1642).

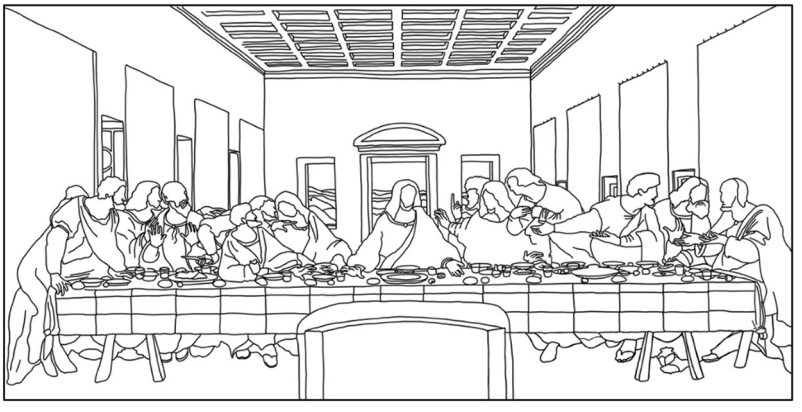

Figure 3. Visual explanation of *The Last Supper's* linearity.

comprehension through linear contours, relying instead on the interplay of light and shadow to create a less 'tangible' design (14) (Figure 4).

Plane versus recession

Plane

Space is disintegrated into 'strongly emphasised receding sequences' (80). According to this definition, Leonardo's work is 'planimetric' (73), with distinct layers constructing spatial depth (Figure 5).

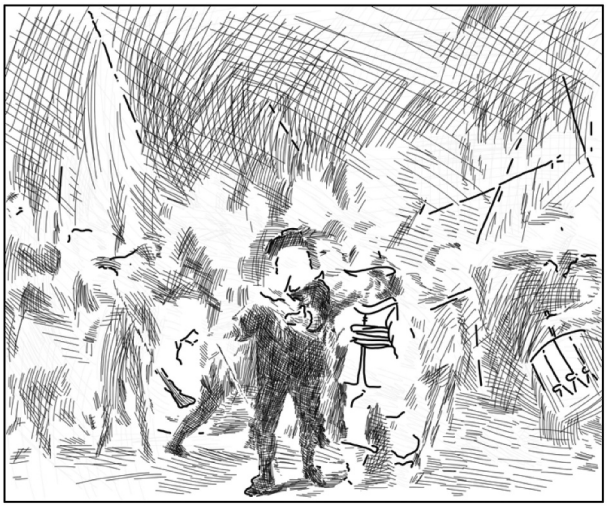

Figure 4. Visual explanation of *The Night Watch*'s painterly approach.

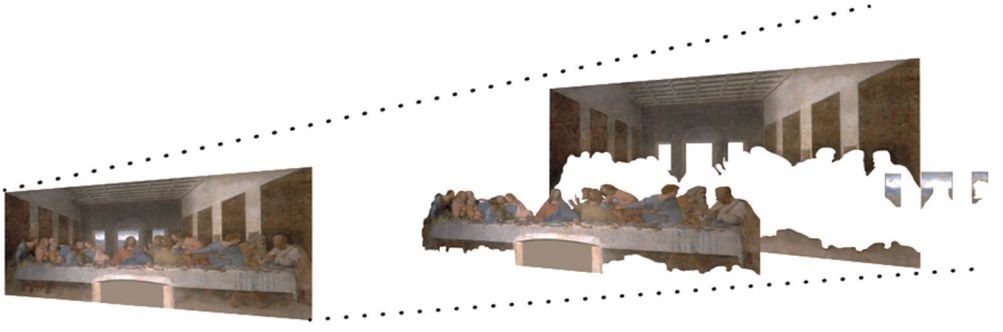

Figure 5. Visual explanation of *The Last Supper's* planimetric spatial construction.

Recession

Space is 'experienced as a homogeneous recessional movement' (82). In Rembrandt's painting, spatial depth is unified in a continuous recession, evoking an intentional ambiguity about depth (Figure 6).

Closed versus open form

Closed form

The composition is characterised as 'a self-contained entity, pointing everywhere back to itself' (124). As illustrated by the green arrows in Figure 7, Leonardo's composition directs attention inward towards the figure of Christ (133), establishing an entity where elements converge upon this focal centre.

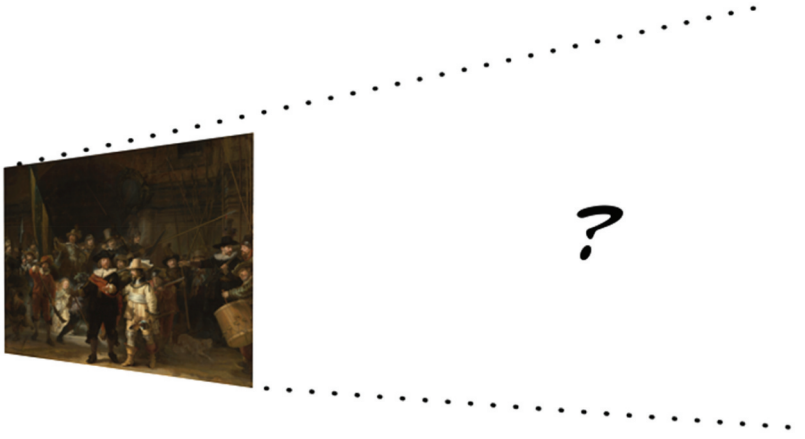

Figure 6. Visual explanation of *The Night Watch*'s recessional spatial construction.

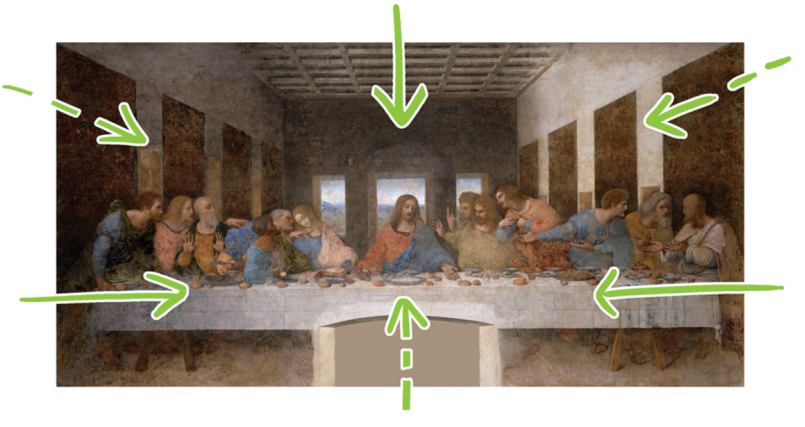

Figure 7. Visual explanation of *The Last Supper's* closed composition.

Open form

The composition 'everywhere points out beyond itself and purposely looks limitless' (124). Rembrandt's composition, lacking a central focal point, guides the viewer's eye to wander freely around and beyond the canvas along fluid, meandering paths, as suggested by the pink arrows in Figure 8.

Multiplicity versus unity

Multiplicity

Visual unity is achieved 'by making the parts as independent as free members' (159). In Leonardo's, elements operate as 'clearly isolated entities' (187), each contributing individually to the whole. Even upon an initial viewing, a significant separation is evident between the figures, the table, and the background, highlighted by the black contour lines in Figure 9.

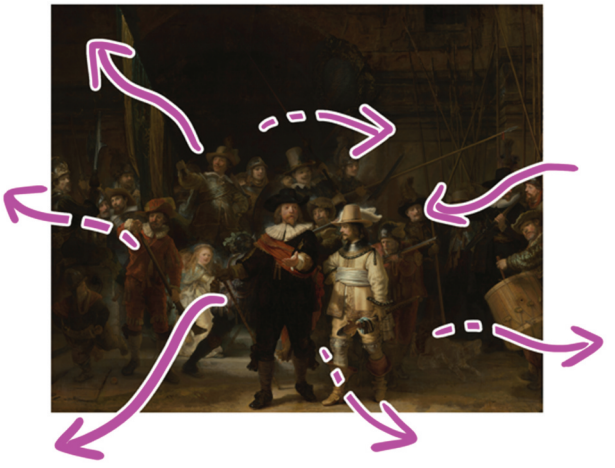

Figure 8. Visual explanation of *The Night Watch*'s open composition.

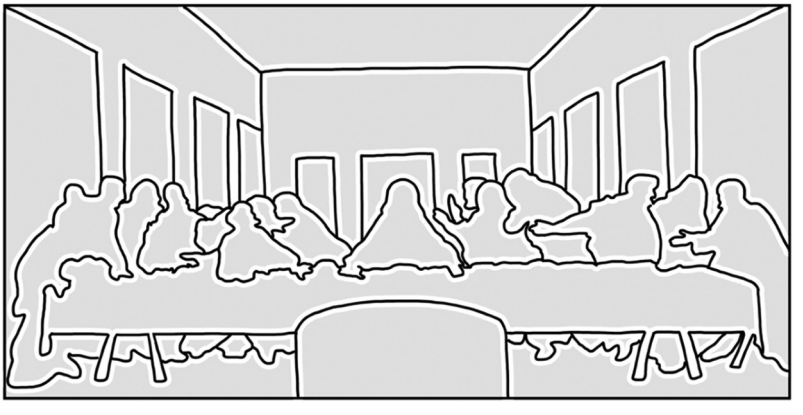

Figure 9. Visual explanation of *The Last Supper's* multiplicity.

Unity

An image 'abolishes the uniform independence of the parts in favour of a more unified total motive' (159). In Rembrandt's work, individual identities dissolve within a cohesive composition, as indicated by the dashed lines in Figure 10, creating an overall effect so unified that the parts are 'reduced to unrecognizability' (170).

Absolute versus relative clarity

Absolute clarity

Visual design is 'completely subservient to clarity' (198). In *The Last Supper*, each elements aligns directly with identifiable, well-defined forms (208), prioritising clarity above all else.

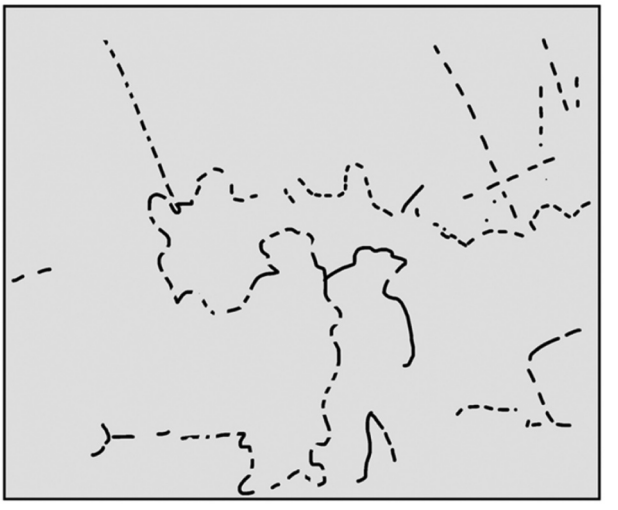

Figure 10. Visual explanation of *The Night Watch*'s unity.

Relative clarity

Ambiguity is deliberately embraced, with expression 'sought in the adventitiousness of an appearance' (198). Engulfed in strong contrasts of light and dark, *The Night Watch* conveys unclarity as 'an artistic possibility' or a form of 'impressionism' (199).

Applying Wölfflin's methodology to comics studies: Horton and Gray's model

In *Art History for Comics Studies* (2022), Horton and Gray advocate for applying Wölfflin's methodology to the formal analysis of comics, aiming to broaden the methodological approaches within the field. Their work challenges the prevailing literary focus in comics studies by integrating art-historical perspectives and formalist criticism (3). They use Wölfflin's methodology to compare the formal characteristics of the Judge Dredd storyline *The Cursed Earth* (1978), drawn by Mike McMahon and Brian Bolland, both emerging in the late 1970s, for British comic magazine *2000AD*, with *One-Eyed Jack* (1976) by John Cooper, an artist from an earlier generation active in the 1960s. Their objective is not to classify *The Cursed Earth* as Baroque 'in the true sense of belonging to that period' (79). Rather, they examine formal features that for their analysis make it the 'equivalent' of Wölfflin's Baroque concept (73).

Horton and Gray's application of Wölfflin's methodology makes two significant contributions to comics studies. First, they demonstrate that formal comparisons of comics can effectively utilise an established art-historical methodology. While earlier efforts, such as those by the French comics critic group SOCERLID, which incorporated art-historical concepts into comics analysis (16–19), and art historian Eric Fernie, who examined formal differences between two comic strips (Fernie 1995, 363), explored similar ideas, Horton and Gray provide a more systematic approach. By treating panels as visual units comparable to paintings, they concentrate on 'individual panels rather than the overall layout of pages' (2022, 78), establishing a clear parallel between comics

and paintings. Their model substantiates the relevance of Wölfflin's methodology for comics studies and opens new possibilities for formal analysis within field.

Second, in bridging Wölfflin's methodology with comics analysis, Horton and Gray address the concept of 'collective style'. They observe that comics studies largely examines formal attributes of comics through the concept of 'individual style'. In contrast, art history often defines 'style' as a collective construct, referring to 'a distinctive manner which permits the grouping of works into related categories' (Fernie 1995, 361). Horton and Gray, therefore, theorise the importance of 'collective style' within comics ctudies (2022, 61). Drawing upon Simon Grennan's comic strip 'Demonstrations' (Grennan 2017, 161–216), they explain how the notion of individual artist style is challenged when artists submit 'themselves to the stylistic imperatives of another' (2022, 61). In line with Grennan, they contest Phillippe Marion's concept of the 'graphiateur', which positions individual style as an unmediated marker of expression in comics creation (61). This perspective allows Horton and Gray to treat works from the same period as a stylistic collective, using Wölfflin's methodology to identify formal distinctions across comics from different periods.

Adapting Wölfflin's methodology to shōjo manga: expanding Horton and Gray's model

This study builds upon Horton and Gray's model in two ways. It undertakes a formal analysis of one comic by comparing it with another, recognising the applicability of Wölfflin's methodology to the comparison. Additionally, it examines formal features through the concept of 'collective' rather than 'individual style'. While the Italian version *W.I.T.C.H.*, as a Disney production, involves multiple artists, and the Japanese version is solely created by Lida, Horton and Gray's notion of 'collective style' and the visual consistency demanded by Disney (Locatelli 2001) ensures the validity of this comparison.

To address the medium specificities of comics, this study also introduces two modifications to the model. First, it expands the analysis beyond individual panels, Horton and Gray's current focus, by drawing upon Groensteen's concept of comics as a 'system'. Here, individual panels serve as the smallest analytical unit (2007, 4) but derive their meaning largely through their interrelationships (6–7). Accordingly, even when analysing a single panel, this study considers its connection to the overall page layout and its visual dialogue with other panels, whether on the same page or across pages.

The second modification reorients Horton and Gray's model to compare works across cultural and regional contexts, rather than across time periods. This shift raises questions about the compatibility with Wölfflin's methodology, originally designed to analyse art across temporal divides, necessitating its recontextualisation. In *Principles of Art History* (1950), Wölfflin posits that his periodisation of art rests on a belief in 'a homogeneous artistic development of the occident' (236), wherein 'variations in individual and national characteristics would cease to have any importance' (12). In other words, Wölfflin's period-based analysis holds within a Western-centric paradigm. How, then, might his methodology function in transcultural settings?

Wölfflin himself suggests the broader applicability of his methodology beyond Western art, remarking that it 'has proved applicable even as far as the domains of Japanese and old Nordic art' (viii). Although he does not elaborate on this in *Principles*,

he addresses it in his foreword to *Indische Baukunst* (1920–1921), a multivolume study on Indian architecture edited by Emanuel La Roche. In this foreword, Wölfflin contrasts Hindu and Indo-Islamic architectural styles, employing 'a comparative method that parallels his treatment of Renaissance and Baroque art in *Principles*' (Juneja 2020, 168). This implies that Wölfflin views his methodology as adaptable to both cultural and temporal comparisons, potentially universal in scope, though he does not 'further pursue in his writings' this line of enquiry (169).

Given its global reception (Levy 2020), a central question regarding Wölfflin's methodology is whether it can be considered universally applicable. While resolving this issue lies beyond the scope of this article, one pertinent consideration remains:

> If one system of thought is adapted, be it geographically or anachronistically, and subsequently emulated as the basis of another, we must question the significance of its refashioning, i.e., what it can reveal that is new about the present and why it should be revived. (Murár 2020, 322)

This study, therefore, analyses shōjo manga through the transcultural trajectory potentially opened by Wölfflin's methodology. It demonstrates that, when applied with cultural sensibility, Wölfflin's methodology can yield valuable insights into the stylistic features of shōjo manga. In this effort, this study joins with Horton and Gray's objective of providing 'models for the further application of art-historical frameworks to the study of comics' (2022, 8).

Transcultural *W.I.T.C.H.*?: situating shōjo manga across east and west

The Italian creation of *W.I.T.C.H.* represents an intriguing transcultural trajectory that warrants an understanding of shōjo manga's development. Originating in early 20th-century Japan, shōjo manga arose after the emergence of *shōjo* as a social category. This concept, marking a young woman's 'transitional state between the social roles of child and wife or mother' (Shamoon 2012, 9), was developed as Japan modernised its education system in the mid-to-late 19th century, which introduced gender-segregated middle and high schools (Masuda 2015, 23). These changes have fuelled the rise of numerous shōjo magazines for adolescent girls, featuring short stories, illustrations, and eventually comics (26), which laid the groundwork for the formal characteristics of shōjo manga. For example, Macoto Takahashi's *Beyond the Storm* (1958), published in *Shōjo* magazine, 'pioneered a distinctive shōjo manga style' (Fujimoto, Thorn, and Thorn 2012, 24). Building on this foundation, *Year 24 Group*, a collective of female shōjo manga artists active in the mid-1970s, introduced themes and visual techniques that revolutionised the genre (Takeuchi 2010, 82).

Among the many iconic shōjo manga works, Naoko Takeuchi's *Sailor Moon* (1992–1997) holds particular relevance to this study as an essential precursor to the conception of *W.I.T.C.H.* By blending the 'magic girl' and 'beautiful fighting girl' subgenres (Tamaki, Lawson, and Vincent 2011, 90), both uncommon in the West (85), *Sailor Moon* famously familiarised Western audiences with Japanese shōjo manga conventions (Erik-Soussi 2015, 24). The series follows five teenage girls in Tokyo who, as reincarnated universe guardians, battle evil while navigating the challenges of adolescence, including young romance. Perhaps due to its unique portrayal of adolescent femininity (Hemmann (2014,

55), *Sailor Moon* achieved phenomenal success upon its release in Europe and America in the 1990s (Miki 2022). It is credited with 'letting the Occidental female public discover comics again' (Pellitteri 2009, 390), which fostered a 'Western *Sailor Moon* generation' of comic editors and artists (Erik-Soussi 2015, 23).

W.I.T.C.H. was created in Italy during a time when '*Sailor Moon* was still fresh in everyone's memory' (Locatelli 2001). In 1997, Elisabetta Gnone, then-director of Disney Italia, collaborated with Italian comic artists Barbara Canepa and Alessandro Barbucci to develop a new Disney comic series targeted at teenage girls. Both artists, having grown up amid the 1990s European boom of manga and anime, naturally turned to shōjo manga for inspiration (Locatelli 2001). The result was *W.I.T.C.H.*, a globally successful series that introduces a hybrid form of comics known as 'euromanga' (Fiamma 2021), exemplifying 'how, in the Europe of the 2000s, processes of aesthetic and commercial hybridisation in the sector of characters for the very young have been carried out' (Pellitteri 2019, 108).

The hybridity of *W.I.T.C.H.* is further evident in its introduction to the Japanese market. While sold in over 70 countries, including China, Brazil, and Sudan (Granelli 2004), *W.I.T.C.H.* was never released in its original form in Japan. Instead, a Japanese publisher had the series entirely redrawn by shōjo manga artist Haruko Lida, 'translating' it into a more 'manga-like' form to appeal to a Japanese audience (Boschi 2008). When Lida's redrawn version was reintroduced to Italy, it was received as authentic shōjo manga (Marge 2013), in contrast to the original Italian version, which was considered as 'hybrid' (Altehenger 2013; Fiamma 2021; Granelli 2004; Locatelli 2001; Pellitteri 2009, 2019). This implicates *W.I.T.C.H.* particular position: while it incorporates shōjo manga features, it is not conventionally recognised as shōjo manga. Both conventionally accepted shōjo and non-shōjo manga elements co-exist within the work.

Acknowledging these complexities, this article frames *W.I.T.C.H.* as a transcultural iteration of shōjo manga infused with non-shōjo manga elements, rather than excluding it from the genre based on a dichotomous standard. These non-shōjo manga elements likely reflect the conventional expectations from Western audiences (Abell 2012, 78), with the Westerns influences closely tied to both Italy and America, considering the cultural contexts of *W.I.T.C.H.*'s creators, native Italians working within the constraints of Disney (Locatelli 2001). In this light, *W.I.T.C.H.* can be seen as a 'Westernisation' or 'transculturation' of shōjo manga. The critical question, then, is how the transculturality of *W.I.T.C.H.* can be understood.

As shown in Figure 11, existing resources suggest two possible readings. First, *W.I.T.C.H.* is often recognised as following the narrative formula of shōjo manga, akin to *Sailor Moon*, by featuring five teenage girls who combat evil as universe guardians while navigating the complexities of adolescence (Altehenger 2013, 66; Pellitteri 2009, 389). By contrast, the element that diverges from shōjo manga lies in the story's setting: the fictional Western city of Heatherfield, described by its creators as 'a middle ground between Genoa and San Francisco'. This setting incorporates aspects of everyday Western teenager life into the narrative (Locatelli 2001).

The second interpretation of *W.I.T.C.H.*'s transculturality focuses on its character design, particularly the use of large eyes. The series is regarded as drawing from shojo manga through its depiction of characters with prominently large eyes (Fiamma 2021; Locatelli 2001). However, the non-shojo element emerges from the fact that this visual

Approach to understanding \ Transcultural aspects of *W.I.T.C.H.*	Conventional shōjo manga elements	Non-shōjo manga elements reflecting Western expectations
Existing resources, confirmed by the Japanese redrawn version of *W.I.T.C.H.*	Storyline	Fictional Western city of Heatherfield as the story setting
	Character design (large eyes)	Disney publication

Figure 11. Current understanding *W.I.T.C.H.*'s transculturality.

choice was made within a Disney publication, an unprecedented 'graphic shock'. In fact, this departure from Disney's conventions was so contentious that *W.I.T.C.H.*'s creators had to make considerable efforts to convince decision-makers to approve it (Locatelli 2001).

These two transcultural characteristics are tacitly confirmed by Lida's redrawn version of *W.I.T.C.H.* Lida largely preserves the storyline and character design of the original version, including the heroines' large eyes, with only occasional modifications, such as replacing certain Western elements of Heatherfield with Japanese customs. Lida clearly recognises that both *W.I.T.C.H.*'s storyline and character design adhere to established shōjo manga conventions.

It is crucial, then, to examine what Lida has modified: what features diverge from shōjo manga conventions, particularly from the perspective of a Japanese shōjo manga artist? Viewed through a transcultural lens, these non-shōjo elements reveal their potential to innovate the genre, contributing to a more nuanced form of shōjo manga as the transculturality of the Italian *W.I.T.C.H.* is explored. This serves as the starting point for the following formal analysis, which employs Wölfflin's methodology to compare the Italian and Japanese versions of *W.I.T.C.H.*

Comparing Italian and Japanese versions of *W.I.T.C.H.*: an analysis through Wölfflin's art-historical methodology

Before proceeding with the comparison, several key points should be noted. First, the comparison is substantiated by the two comics' nearly identical storylines. Second, although only three pairs of images are presented, they are examples that indicate applicability across the entirety of the comics. Third, this analysis is strictly formal, refraining from qualitative judgements in line with Wölfflin's caution (1995, 231). Fourth, the examples are shown in their original reading orders, with the Italian version arranged left-to-right and the Japanese version in reverse. Finally, as with presentation of Wölfflin's methodology, author-created diagrams accompany the analysis to provide further clarity.

Linear versus painterly: the condition of line

Wölfflin's first conceptual pair, focusing on line, is employed to compare two versions of the same transformative scene in *W.I.T.C.H.*, as the heroines first assume their magical forms. Presenting identical narratives, both versions utilise 'layering', a page layout technique in which panels are superimposed over others, a device pioneered by Japanese shōjo manga artists in the 1970s (Shamoon 2008, 146). However, this analysis contends that the Italian version of *W.I.T.C.H.* (Figure 12) adopts a predominantly linear approach, while the Japanese version (Figure 13) favours a more painterly technique.

At first glance, this assertion may seem counterintuitive. Indeed, the Italian version, being fully coloured while the Japanese version is rendered in black and white, may suggest an opposite conclusion. A closer examination, however, reveals distinct treatment of the line in each version. In the Italian *W.I.T.C.H.* page, elements are clearly delineated by unbroken, precise lines that encapsulate colours within defined borders. As illustrated in Figure 14, it is the use of line that enables the Italian page to convey the dynamism of figures, water, air, and the pink radiance bursting across the page. Even as this radiance extends beyond the panels into the page's blank background at the bottom, its contours remain crisply defined and visually separated from the surrounding space. In contrast, the Japanese version relies less on line to define figures and objects, instead blending their outlines with monochrome screen tones to create a blurry effect (Figure 15). For instance, the light radiating from one heroine's hand disperses through open spaces, intersecting the outlines of surrounding figures before dissolving into a sea of bubbles in the background. This effect of merging, rather than precise linework, ultimately establishes the tone of this page.

This contrast between the two pages is further accentuated when extending the notion of line to panel borders. In the Italian version, solid panel frames (Figure 14) prompt viewers to process each panel in isolation, effectively segmenting the page into discrete, 'constituent images' (Hatfield 2009, 140). Together with well-defined outlines, these borders contribute to what Wölfflin describes as 'a linear vision that sharply distinguishes form from form' (1950, 19). Conversely, the Japanese version uses discernible yet open-ended panel frames (Figure 15), inviting viewers to engage in filling the visual gaps between fragmented lines and facilitating a more fluid eye movement across the page. This approach fosters a 'non-linear, holistic' reading experience, wherein panels are perceived as interconnected images 'on an unbroken surface' rather than as individual frames (Hatfield 2009, 140). If the merging of outlines and screen tone already initiates a painterly vision that 'aims at that movement which passes over the sum of things' (Wölfflin 1950, 19), the permeable panel boundaries further reinforce this aesthetic.

Plane versus recession: the spatial depth of comics pages

Plane and Recession examines how spatial depth is represented. This paired concept is applied to compare a scene where two heroines arrive at a school Halloween party, greeting their headmaster. The Italian version depicts this scene on one page (Figure 16), while the Japanese version spans two pages (Figures 17 and 18). This analysis argues that the Italian version is more planimetric than its Japanese counterpart.

Figure 12. A transformative scene (Disney 2001). Copyright notice: © 2017 Disney.

Figure 13. Redrawn version of the transformative scene (Lida 2003). Copyright notice: © 2003 Disney and Haruko Iida.

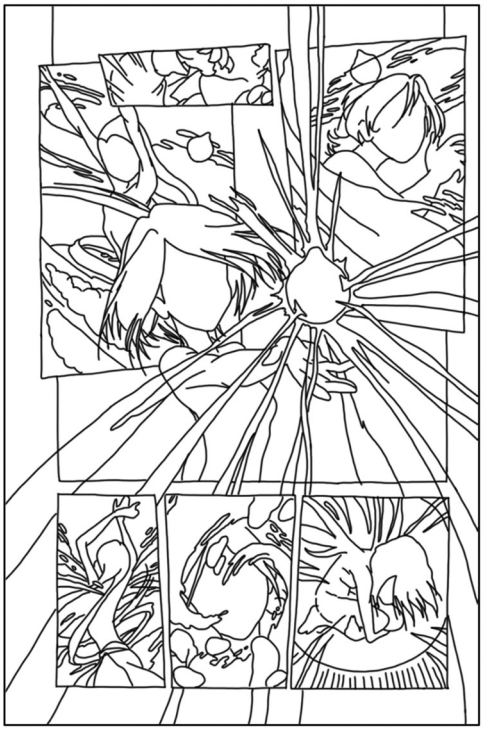

Figure 14. Visual explanation of the Italian version's linearity.

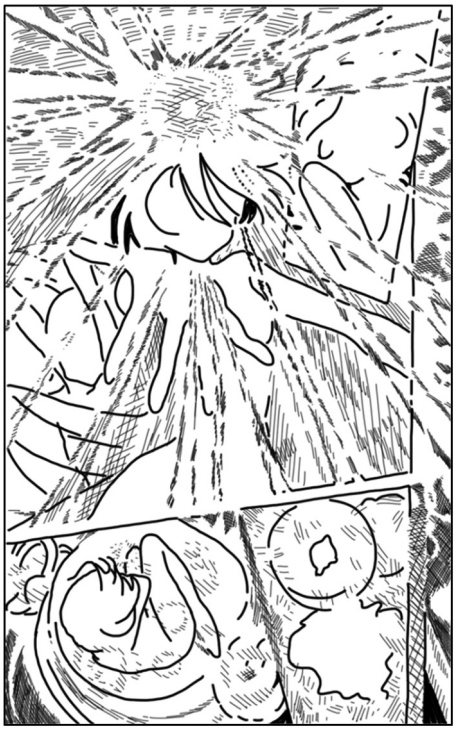

Figure 15. Visual explanation of the Japanese version's painterly approach.

Figure 16. Halloween party (Disney 2001). Copyright notice: © 2017 Disney.

Figure 17. Redrawn version of the Halloween party scene, second page (Lida 2003). Copyright notice: © 2003 Disney and Haruko Iida.

Figure 18. Redrawn version of the Halloween party scene, first page (Lida 2003). Copyright notice: © 2003 Disney and Haruko Iida.

Four vertically arranged panels run alongside this scene: in the first, the headmaster speaks to three young boys in demon-like costumes, who are stealing away food from the buffet plates, 'Bon appétit! From the look of your booty, I'd say you all like the buffet!' In the next panel, the leader boy responds, 'It's not how it looks, Ms. Knickerbocher! We're just stockin'up for winter!' The headmaster smiles as she walks away, quipping, 'So another school year wasted hibernating . . . excellent!' The boy thinks to himself in the following panel, 'Witch! You won't be langhin come midnight!' The final panel, located at the bottom-right corner, shows the mother of another girl who is not present in this page looking at her wristwatch by a bedroom door and saying 'Will! It's super-late! And we still have to pick up your friend!' Above her, a caption box reads 'At eleven . . . '. The page as a whole employs vibrant colours, particularly shades of blue, yellow, and purple, evoking a lively, celebratory atmosphere.

This study acknowledges that, when comparing individual panels, both versions may display a comparable level of spatial recession. For example, the panel at the top of the Italian page (Figure 16), depicting the party entrance, achieves recession using colour, whereas the corresponding panel on the Japanese right-side spread (Figure 18) relies on screen tones and shades of grey for depth. In certain instances, the Japanese rendition even appears more planimetric than the Italian, as demonstrated in the jack-o'-lantern panel on the Japanese left-side spread (Figure 17), where the background is presented in planes, in contrast to the Italian page's vibrant colour renderings of the jack-o'-lantern.

The overall perception of depth of a comics page, however, is ultimately determined not by individual panels but by their interaction across the page. In this respect, the Italian page is planimetric through its use of colour. Here, variations in colour intensity across different panels establishes at least four pictorial layers: the white spaces of the speech balloons, the figures of the heroines with the headmaster behind them and flowers in the foreground, the enclosed panels, and the fading background images of the party crowd (Figure 19). The first three layers stand against the party background, guiding the viewer's eye to differentiate each layer in sequence until it reaches the recessive background. This layered depth invites viewers to look through the planes into the party scene, evoking what Wölfflin's terms as a 'will to the plane' (1950, 73).

In contrast, the Japanese version, through an interplay of element arrangement and screen tone, offers a less straightforward division of planes, emphasising the pages' recessional depth. In the right-hand page (Figure 18), multiple pictorial elements convey contrasting spatial dimensions: the heroines, facing the viewers under the party banner, appear to enter the party scene, suggesting an outward spatial expansion, while the approaching crowd implies a space receding inward, seemingly outside the party environment. The white background, dotted with shimmering light, adds spatial ambiguity, suggesting multiple possible dimensions. The monochrome screen tone integrates these elements, merging them to construct a cohesive sense of depth from the page's exterior to its interior. This prompts viewers to perceive a unified, vibrant party scene rather than distinguishing elements into layers (Figure 20). Thus, 'the forward and backward relations are emphasised, and the spectator is compelled to co-relate in recession' (Wölfflin 1950, 73). A similar dynamic is at work on the left page (Figure 17), where the unusual shapes of blank panels in the upper section and the white space in the lower right create an ambiguous spatial environment, encouraging viewers to integrate rather than parsing individual panels, further enhancing the recessional approach.

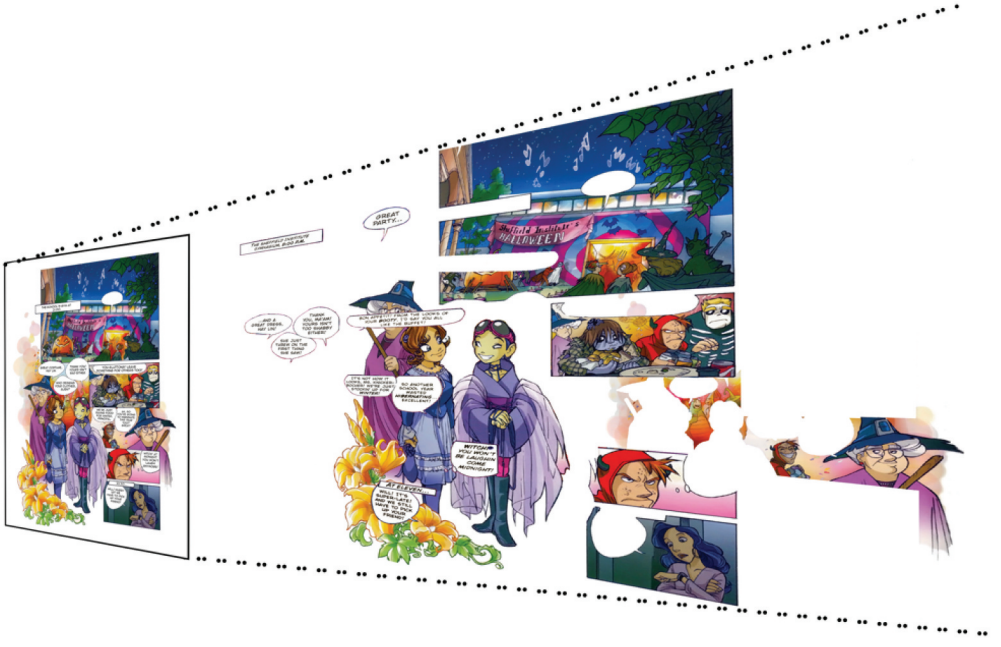

Figure 19. Visual explanation of the Italian version's planimetric spatial construction.

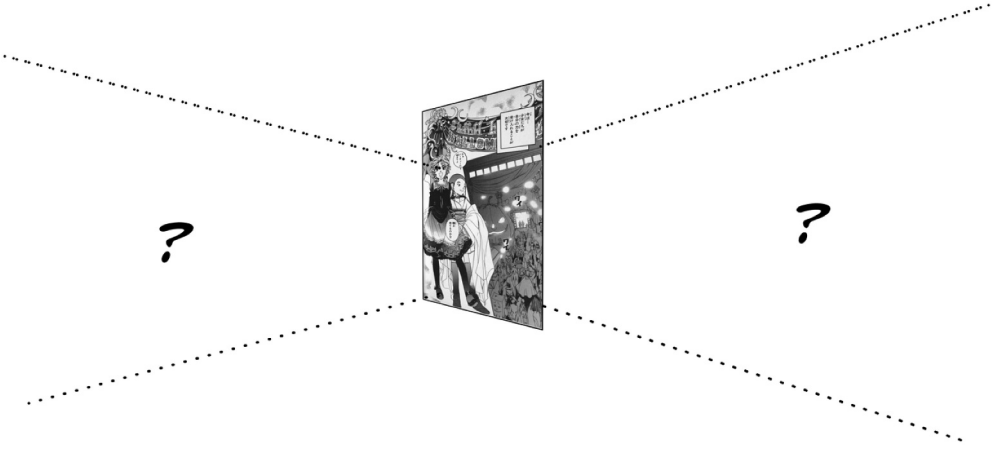

Figure 20. Visual explanation of the Japanese version's recessional spatial construction (first page).

Closed versus open form: compositional considerations

Wölfflin's third paired concepts, Closed and Open Form, relate to composition and its connection to the idea of central focal points. Applying this pair to the previous examples (Figures 16–18), this study observes that, as previously discussed, the overall effect of a page is primary shaped by interactions between elements rather than the content within individual panels, thereby focusing on the former. When considering the entire pages, it is evident that both the Italian version and the right-side Japanese spread (Figure 18)

Figure 21. Visual explanation of the Japanese version's open composition (first page). Copyright notice: © 2003 Disney and Haruko Iida.

employ the same shōjo manga technique, which is thought to create a focal point and suggest a closed form: the 'catwalk effect'. Coined by Groensteen, this effect is a hallmark of shōjo manga layouts, wherein a full-length image of the main character appears '"above" the panels or in the side margins of the page', allowing viewers to appreciate the details of the character's consume (2011, 57). Both pages utilise the 'catwalk effect' for the same two heroines, clearly designed to highlight their Halloween party attire. Nevertheless, this study identifies that only the Italian version employs a closed form, while the Japanese version adopts a more open composition.

This contrast is achieved through the interplay between colour intensity, and the size and arrangement of elements. In the Italian version, areas of dark blue in the top panel and bright yellow in the bottom left corner form a visual diagonal centred on the heroines, as shown by the green arrows in Figure 21. The surrounding elements are either darker, less saturated, or smaller than the heroines' figures, directing attention firmly to them, indicated by the green dashed arrows (Figure 21). As a result, the page

Figure 22. Visual explanation of the Italian version's closed composition. Copyright notice: © 2017 Disney.

elements cohere as 'a 'self-existing piece of the world', with the heroines as the focal point, which closely aligns with Wölfflin definition of a closed form (1950, 126). By contrast, in the Japanese page, although the heroines are layered above other elements, their size, brightness, and detail are comparable to the party scene and banner, making them one of the several equally weighed components rather than a dominant compositional centre. Additionally, these elements sit along the page edges, and without panel frames, they appear to spill outward, as suggested in Figure 22. This produces an effect where 'the filling has lost touch with the frame' (125) and 'the whole is meant to look more like a piece cut haphazard out of the visible world' (126), evoking an open form.

How do the Italian page and the left-hand page of the Japanese version (Figure 17), which redraws parts of the original story without the 'catwalk' effect, compare? The conclusion remains consistent due to element arrangement. The Italian version clusters all elements around the central focal point, leaving the page edges mostly blank (Figure 22). Even the irregular background shapes, which might allow for more flexibility than framed panels, remain situated around this centre, heightening a closed

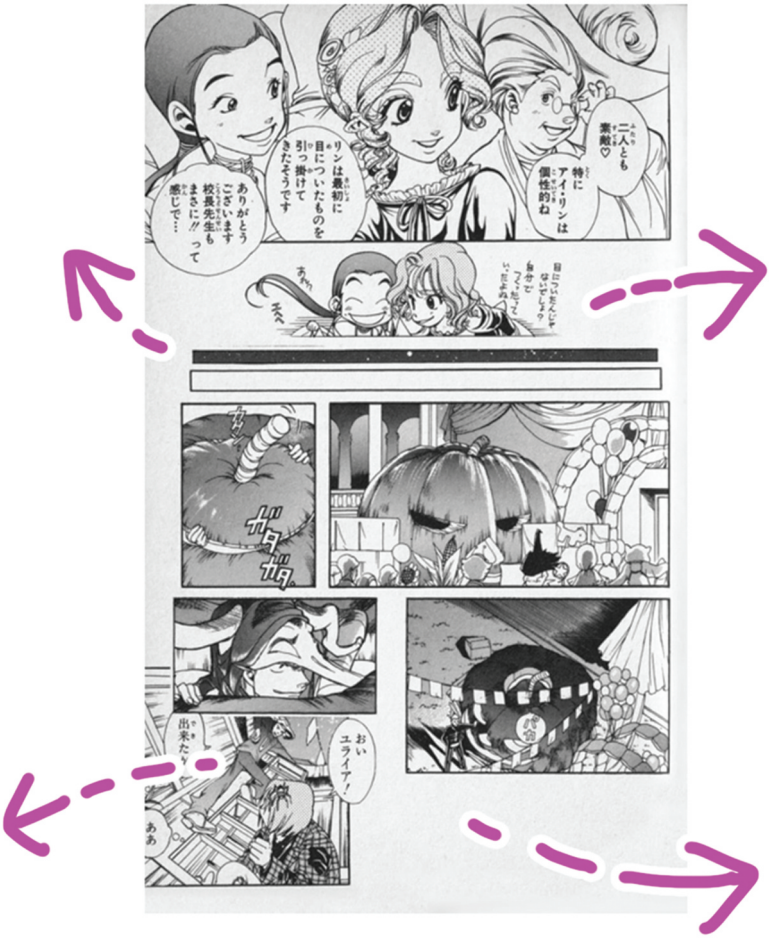

Figure 23. Visual explanation of the Japanese version's open composition (second page). Copyright notice: © 2003 Disney and Haruko Iida.

composition. In contrast, elements in the Japanese version appear to float freely across the page (Figure 23). Panels at the top and bottom edges seem to extend beyond the page, suggesting a drifting quality. The two narrow, rectangular shapes in the middle serve not only, as Natsume Fusanosuke notes, to 'create a temporal order through panel segmentation' (Natsume 2020, 67–68) but also to loosen the overall composition. The white space in the bottom right corner further reinforces this openness, encouraging elements to move independently rather than forming a cohesive cluster. Thus, both pages of the Japanese version exhibit a more open form compared to the Italian version.

Multiplicity versus unity: exploring panel relationships

Applying Wölfflin's concepts of Multiplicity and Unity to comics presents challenges, as the inherently multi-panel format of comics often inclines them towards multiplicity. However, as Wölfflin observes, 'unity fulfils itself in many ways'

(1950, 158), and multiplicity can similarly manifest in diverse forms. This analysis applies this pair through two approaches: the page layout and Groensteen's notion of 'braiding' (2007), both highlighting the inter-panel relationships. It compares the Italian version (Figure 24) and the Japanese version (Figures 25 and 26) of a scene where the heroine, for the first time, encounters her transformed self through a bookshop window. In a manner consistent with earlier examples, the Japanese version expands the Italian one-page scene across two pages. The study contends that the Italian page displays a stronger inclination towards multiplicity than the Japanese pages.

This inclination is evident when analysing the page layout at the precise moment of the magical discovery. In the Italian version, a large panel depicts the heroine abruptly stopping her bicycle as she stares in astonishment at her reflection in the window. This closely mirrors a similar panel on the right-side Japanese spread (Figure 26) in terms of perspective, pose, and composition. The difference, however, lies in the smaller accompanying panels: in the Italian page, two small adjacent panels showing a close-up of the bicycle and a high-angle shot of the heroine are placed next to the large panel, while the Japanese version embeds a single intra-panel of the heroine's wide-opened eyes within the main panel. In both, the interplay of these panels with the larger image effectively conveys a moment of surprise, yet the Italian version spaces its panels neatly, arranging them into a rectangular configuration surrounded by empty space (Figure 27). In contrast, the Japanese intra-panel is tightly integrated, with no gaps between it and the larger panel (Figure 28). Furthermore, the Italian page includes visible gaps between panels and the page borders, creating a contained page layout, while the Japanese version employs a 'full bleed' effect, extending panels to the edges of the page. As a result, the Italian panels are perceived as 'separate parts' of the page, underscoring multiplicity (Wölfflin 1950, 156), while the Japanese panels form a 'homogeneous mass' (157) that suggests unity.

One might argue that the Japanese version's segmentation of the scene across multiple panels and pages implies multiplicity. This analysis suggests otherwise, drawing upon the concept of 'braiding', the second approach to exploring Multiplicity and Unity in comics. Groensteen defines 'braiding' as a non-linear linking of panels through recurring visual elements within or across pages (2007, 145–151). Panels that are ''physically and contextually independent' can, through braiding, 'be 'revealed as communicating closely' (158), thereby generating an impression of unity.

Returning to the panels depicting the magical encounter, the depiction of the heroine confronting her reflection serves as a visual motif, represented by an eye in Figures 29 and 30. In the Italian version, this motif is isolated, with no recurrence within the page or in subsequent panels (Figure 29). Consequently, viewers are likely to interpret each panel individually, perceiving the heroine's various actions across panels, such as encountering, thinking, and staring, as equally significant. This positions panels as a 'co-ordination of the accents' (159), which conveys a sense of multiplicity. By contrast, the Japanese version repeats this motif three times across the left page (Figure 30). Reinforcing the encountering scene in the viewer's mind, this repetition diminishes the independence of each panel, so that 'each has abdicated part of its independence to the general interest' of presenting the scene (Wölfflin 1950, 157). Thus, despite its higher panel count, the Japanese rendition produces a more unified effect than the Italian page.

Figure 24. A magical encounter (Disney 2001). Copyright notice: © 2017 Disney.

Figure 25. Redrawn version of the magical encounter scene, second page (Lida 2003).

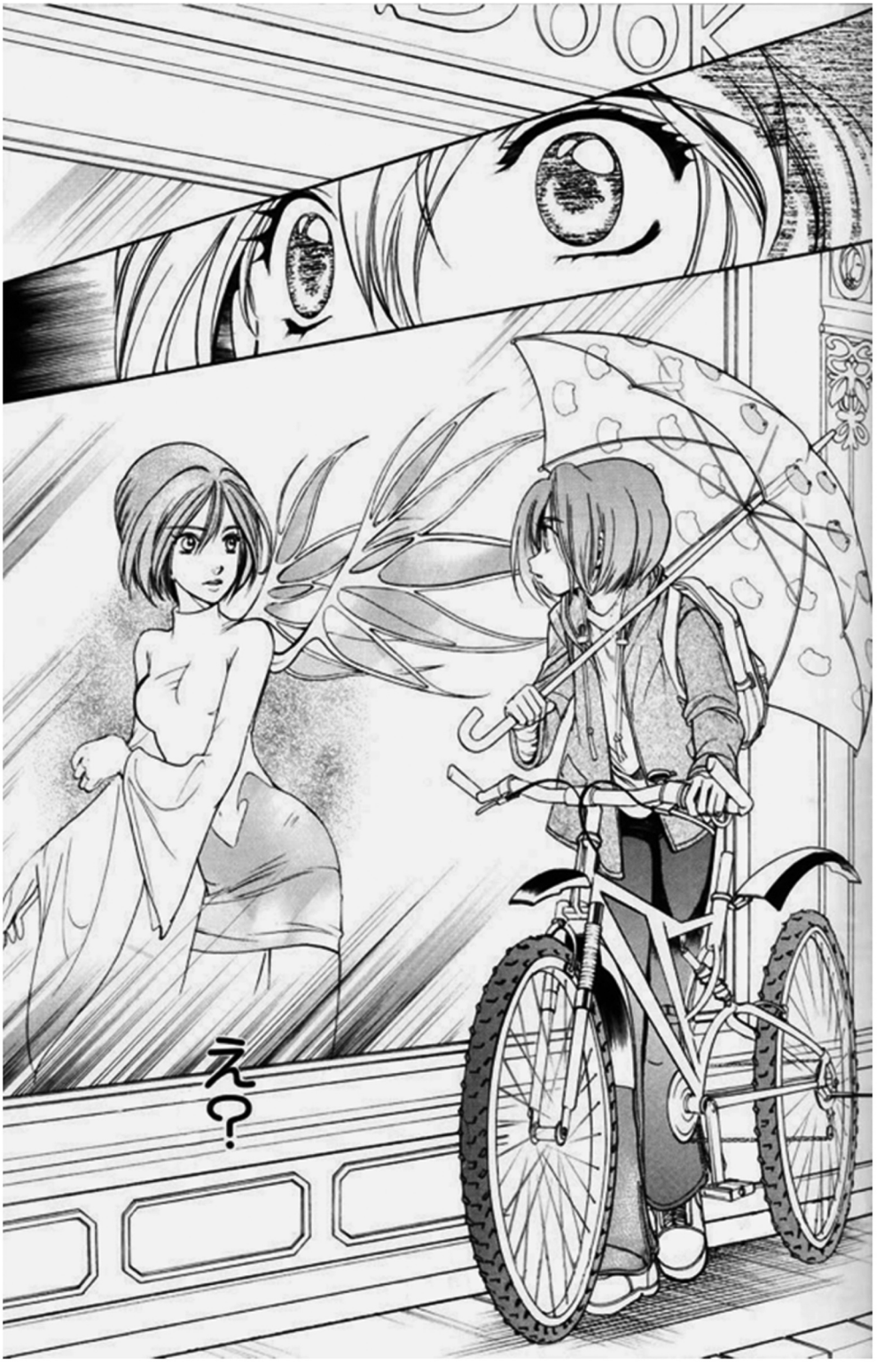

Figure 26. Redrawn version of the magical encounter scene, first page (Lida 2003). Copyright notice: © 2003 Disney and Haruko Iida.

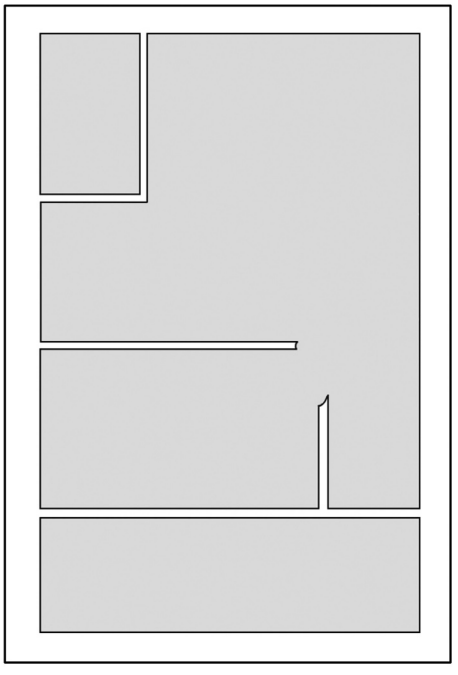

Figure 27. Visual explanation of the Italian version's multiplicity, as conveyed through its page layout.

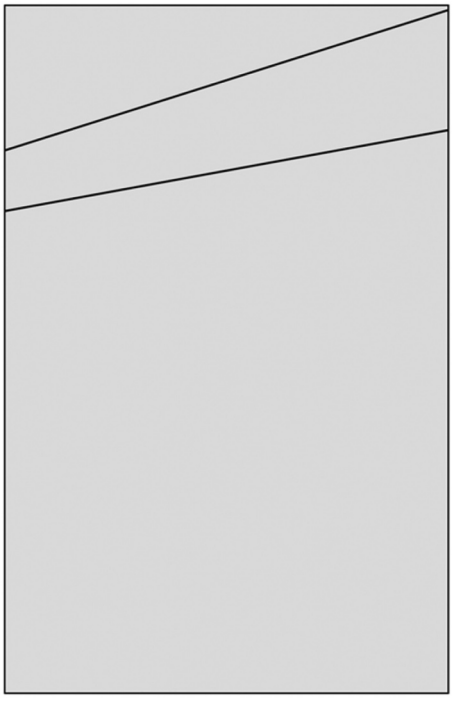

Figure 28. Visual explanation of the Japanese version's unity, as conveyed through its page layout.

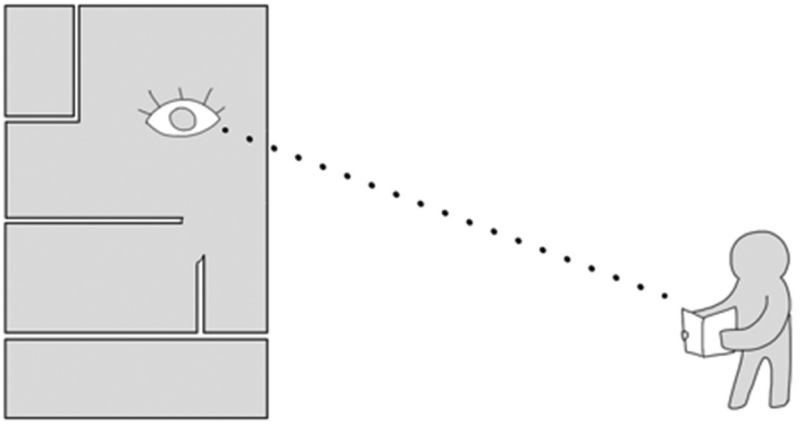

Figure 29. Visual explanation of the Italian version's multiplicity, as conveyed through braiding.

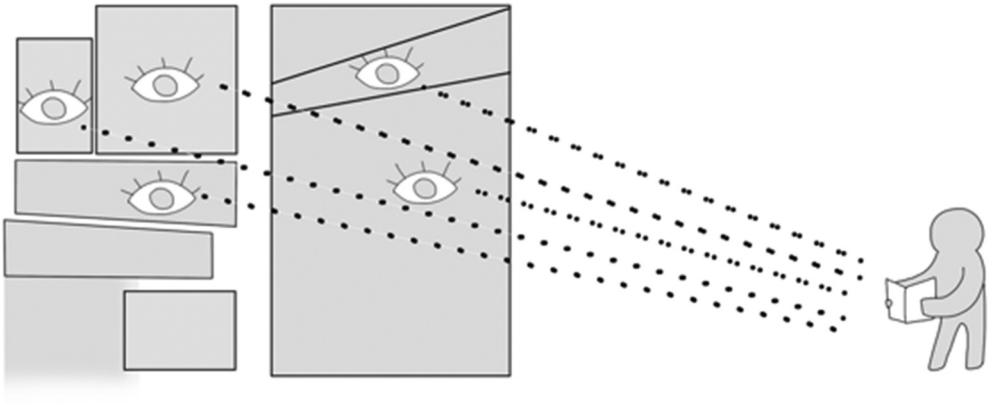

Figure 30. Visual explanation of the Japanese version's unity, as conveyed through braiding.

Absolute versus relative clarity: a summary

Wölfflin's final paired concept, Absolute and Relative Clarity, is 'best considered as a summation' encapsulating the previous concepts (Horton and Gray 2022, 72). Revisiting earlier examples reveals how their formal qualities, analysed through previous pairing, contribute to absolute or relative clarity. For instance, the linearity of the Italian transformation scene (Figure 12) signifies what Wölfflin describes as 'a clearness of the unclear' (1950, 97). While pictorial elements, such as the pink radiance, can stretch across the page to evoke ambiguity, their delineated contours maintain 'subservience to clarity' (198). In contrast, the permeable lines in the Japanese version (Figure 13) not only produce a painterly effect but also a sense of elusiveness, allowing relative clarity to emerge (199).

Similarly, in the party scene, the Italian version (Figure 16) uses colour, as well as the size and arrangement of elements, to achieve planimetric spatial depth and a closed composition, presenting the page with clarity, where 'even the most hidden form is

somehow understood' (198). Conversely, the Japanese version (Figures 17 and 18) employs a recessional approach and a open composition, rendering elements less explicitly with an 'indeterminateness for impressionism', which cultivates a sense of relative clarity (199). In the mysterious encounter, the Italian version (Figure 24) emphasises panel separation and multiplicity through page layout, enhancing overall clarity. The Japanese version (Figures 25 and 26), however, minimises the gaps between panels and employs repeated visual motifs through braiding, encouraging viewers to group panels together and prioritise relative clear impressions over absolute, 'clear and uniformly comprehensible' representations (199).

Rediscovering shōjo manga in a transcultural context

This analysis employs Wölfflin's methodology to compare the formal features of the Italian and Japanese versions of *W.I.T.C.H.*, using the five paired concepts to reveal visual differences between them. It identifies these differences as elements of the original *W.I.T.C.H.* that Lida views as non-shōjo manga conventions, which she modifies in the redrawn version to meet Japanese readers' expectations. However, from a transcultural perspective, it is precisely these deviations that contribute to the reinvention of shōjo manga. This is shown in Figure 31, an expanded version of Figure 11, developed through Wölfflin's methodology.

In the first three comparisons, the Italian version of *W.I.T.C.H.* shares certain typical shōjo manga page layout techniques with the Japanese version, namely 'layering' and the 'catwalk effect'. However, it differs in its linearity or greater emphasis on line, planimetric spatial construction, and closed composition. This provides nuance to Groensteen observation that 'layering' and the 'catwalk effect' are among the key features of shōjo manga page layouts that diverge mostly from Western comics (2011, 57–58). In the Italian version, although these distinctive page layouts are adopted, they are employed in a manner that displays subtle visual differences from the Japanese version, achieved through the combined use of colour, as well as the size and arrangement of pictorial elements.

The fourth pair, Multiplicity and Unity, similarly highlights subtle differences in panel arrangement between the Italian and Japanese versions. These differences stem partly from the Italian version's page layout, which is not utilised in the Japanese version as part of shōjo manga conventions, and partly from the extent to which visual motifs are repeated to create a braiding effect. Most importantly, as summarised by the final paired concept, these previously discussed formal differences indicate that the Italian *W.I.T.C.H.* evokes a higher degree of clarity, in contrast with the Japanese version's reliance on relative clarity or ambiguity.

The Italian version of *W.I.T.C.H.,* therefore, embodies the 'westernisation' or 'transculturation' of shōjo manga in concrete forms, demonstrating that its transculturality extends beyond its storyline and character design to encompass the subtleties of its formal presentation. Rather than diminishing *W.I.T.C.H.*'s alignment with shōjo manga conventions, these distinctions enrich and expand the definitions of shōjo manga in a transcultural context. They highlight the genre's potential within a Western-oriented setting, revealing the complex nature of shōjo manga as a genre that is continuously reshaped, expanded, and innovated through transcultural exchange.

<table>
<tr><th>Transcultural aspects of W.I.T.C.H.
Approach to understanding</th><th>Conventional shōjo manga elements</th><th colspan="2">Non-shōjo manga elements reflecting Western expectations</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Existing resources</td><td>Storyline</td><td>Fictional Western city of Heatherfield as the story setting</td><td rowspan="6">Absolute clarity</td></tr>
<tr><td>Character design (large eyes)</td><td>Disney publication</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Wölfflin's art-historical comparative methodology</td><td rowspan="4">Page layout techniques ('layering'; 'catwalk effect')</td><td>Linearity</td></tr>
<tr><td>Planimetric spatial construction</td></tr>
<tr><td>Closed composition</td></tr>
<tr><td>Multiplicity-oriented page layout</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td>An impression of panel multiplicity analysed through braiding</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Figure 31. Enhanced understanding *W.I.T.C.H.*'s transculturality through Wölfflin's methodology.

The limits and potential of Wölfflin's methodology for comics analysis

The final part of the article reflects on the limitations and potential of Wölfflin' methodology for analysing comics. Horton and Gray acknowledge certain limitations, including the unavoidable imposition of 'stylistic norms' as benchmarks for evaluation and the 'stark polarisation of terms employed' (2022, 80). Additionally, this study notes that, as Wölfflin's methodology is developed for analysing paintings, it requires adaption to accommodate the specificities of comics as a medium and may still fall short in fully encompassing the intricacies of comics. While this study incorporates Groensteen's concept of the comics system (2007) as part of the adaption, future inquires could further enhance Wölfflin's methodology by

integrating it with other comics theories and analytic tools from disciplines such as narratology, thereby enabling more comprehensive frameworks for formal and textual analysis.

My adaption of Horton and Gray's model for comparing the two versions of *W.I.T.C.H.* reveals the potential of Wölfflin's art-historical methodology in comics analysis. It demonstrates how formal differences, though subtle and perhaps initially imperceptible, can be identified and examined in depth using Wölfflin's detailed methodology. Moreover, beyond its capacity to 'account for stylistic similarities and differences' across period styles (Horton and Gray 2022, 7), this study shows that the methodology serves as an effective tool for transcultural comparison within Comics Studies. The methodology facilitates a nuanced exploration of comics conventions across cultures, offering considerable potential for broader application in the study of global comics. This article thus extends Horton and Gray's call for Art History-informed approaches to Comics Studies from a transcultural perspective, underscoring the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship and cross-disciplinary collaboration (Hatfield 2017, xix) in advancing transcultural comics research.

Note

1. It is important to acknowledge that, while Wölfflin's methodology is widely regarded as a 'classic', it has also been subject to significant critique, including its implications of racism (Farago 1995) and its applicability to contemporary contexts (Summers et al. 2007). Nevertheless, this article emphasises the potential relevance of Wölfflin's methodology when adapted for comics studies.

Disclosure statement

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