Final Project Critique

Through imitation, parody, and over-exaggeration, this comic discusses and categorizes four well-known categories of manga—*shojo* (like *Gentlemen's Alliance*), informational (a branch of *seinen;* like *Oishinbo*), harem-style *shonen* (like *Love Hina*), and *4-koma* comedy (like *Azumnaga Daioh*). Though the characters and plot are relatively original in the sense that the author does not directly borrow either from any one specific title, the project successfully identifies and isolates the distinguishing aesthetics, character archetypes, and plot-related characteristics of each genre. Despite being short (only nine pages in total with one page of character introduction unrelated to the manga analysis), each two-page segment purifies the essence of what defines each genre and exemplify it in a brief yet self-contained skit. A continuous coherent dialogue also overlays each story taking place outside the "manga vision" each real life character's sort of double plays in), illustrated in text boxes outside the actual word bubbles and further analyzing/joking about each genre. Nonetheless, the project is not without flaws—both technically and narratively—but such imperfections can only be expected considering the time frame.

The first narrative parodies the over-the-top and hyper-romantic nature of *shojo* manga, drawing inspiration primarily from the art and pacing of *Gentlemen's Alliance*. The male characters, particularly Michael, are aloof, self-important, and handsome, while the female protagonist, Perry seems scatter-brained, light-hearted, and easy to sway emotionally. The plot also alludes to the story of *Gentlemen's Alliance* in the sense that the female heroine feels an unrequited love (albeit under-developed) for a male classmate who she fear may not be interested in women. The author plays the homosexual theme up far more with the inclusion of Dylan as a side-character, over playing the "bisexual undertones" supposedly present in all *shojo* manga.

While the art of *Gentlemen's Alliance* admittedly did see an overwhelming abuse of screen tones (the dots, crosshatching, and patterns put over the inked line art of the manga), the limited variety of screen tones that the author of this project had access to is very apparent in this segment. Since multiple screen tones are used in each frame to create a complex, layered effect, the repetition of certain types becomes more apparent simply due to their saturation of the page—particularly the "sparkly" and basic dot tones. In general, this post-inking technique made the pages as a whole look more cluttered; however, while this may seem counter-active to the

point of the comic, it actually served as a humourous commentary on what could be seen as an aesthetic flaw of the *shojo* genre itself. On top of this, Perry's facial proportions seemed particularly inconsistent, and most of the frames featuring her focused on the face, which leaves a reader wondering if the author was really capable of drawing anything other than just eyes, faces, and hair in this *shojo* style. All in all, these two pages give a good sense of *shojo* manga, but do not do justice to the author's artistic proficiency (or lack there of) in the style.

The next skit mirrored *Oishinbo* in its style and narrative, starring Diana as the prodigy of Japanese cooking and Perry as the antagonistic, uncultured force. Just like its inspiration, this segment features an almost disturbingly nationalistic overtone (as seen in the final frame) and demeans people not educated or reformed enough to understand the delicacies of Japanese cuisine. The author also included a tongue-in-cheek reference to *Oishinibo*'s somewhat misogynistic implications by having Diana comment on the value of the "love of a housewife's hands" in the preparation of rice balls. In terms of the art style, this segment was particularly successful in its imitation of *Oishinibo*'s constant back-and-forth between photo-realistic rendering of food and not-so-stunning character art.

Nevertheless, the lack of frames illustrating the characters' full bodies was a little compositionally disappointing and some of the frames featuring food that were supposed to look painstakingly rendered appeared a tad rushed. Naturally, this was probably due to the time constraints of the project and the author's devotion to finishing the whole comic instead of devoting too much time to any one part. The text in and around the last frame of the comic also looks particularly cluttered, which is most likely a result of poor organization and lack of foresight on the author's behalf; since she probably did not spend a whole lot of time planning out where every frame and speech bubble was going to be placed (a process that would tack on even more time to the development process), visual "crunches" like these seem more prevalent than they would be in a professional comic.

The third comic, starring Dylan as the archetypal clumsy, unfortunate male protagonist, very directly references harem-style *shonen* manga like *Love Hina* wherein the nuclear male finds himself surrounded by an ever-growing "harem" of pretty girls. Usually, stories like this require a much longer and more-developed time-span to establish relationships between the core protagonist and his female friends, putting this skit at a bit of a disadvantage from the get-go. Nonetheless, the comic does manage to humourously exaggerate the ever-present

rope of accidental sexual harassment in harem manga in lieu of its lack of any real character development

This segment in particular required the development and rendering of a multitude of more dynamic poses in comparison to the other three (particularly in the scenes where Dylan first encounters Perry and Diana), which oftentimes resulted in skewed anatomy and inaccurate proportions. The second frame featuring the city landscape Dylan is running through also appears amateur in its perspective and overall execution, but seemed necessary to include considering the prevalence of such frames in manga like *Love Hina*. Technically speaking, a few screen tones also managed to get deleted sometime in the finalization of these pages, and while these absences are not terribly noticeable (the spots on Jamie's tanktop in the final frame are missing), such things would be inexcusable from a professional artist.

The final skit followed the example of *Azumanga Daioh* in their pacing, frame layout, and story and starred Michael in the comical melancholy of his own everyday life. Again, more pages devoted to this segment would have probably yielded a better imitation of the original material since *4-koma* manga often relies on many, many pages of short stories to properly build a convincing, engaging character. However, the author probably assumed that Michael and his friends had been given enough development in the last seven pages to avoid having to draw more than two pages—and for the most part, this was true. Like in *Azumanga Daioh*, these brief four-panel stories rely on the character's entertaining quirks and interactions to provide a dry, subtle humour.

Since this segment drew most of its inspiration from an already simple style, it is hard to find fault with the aesthetics; however, some of the stories are less easy to relate to due to their nature as "inside jokes." All four of these skits suffer in some way from this problem, but since this part most heavily depended upon mundane, everyday stories for its narrative (as opposed a more fictional/fantasy alternative), it ran up against the most conflict for not including enough material for an "outside reader" to relate with. The most successful four-panel comics were the first and the third, since the first could be understood simply from the universal notion of "loneliness is miserable," and the third's humour lay more in its awkward pacing than its actual story. The second comic, on the other hand, relied too much on the reader's knowledge of video games, and the fourth comic literally relayed the events of a real-life happening, and if the reader was not there, it would be hard for him/her to relate or find it funny. In technical terms, the second narrative also features an exclusion of necessary screen tones in its third frame, but since the focus of that frame is supposed to fall on the controller and not

Michael's upper body, it can be excused in light of the artist's skill and time constraints.

Looking at the comic as a whole, the author's rushed execution of the project is apparent, but her haste never completely compromises the quality of the work. While it is clear no frames were ever inked, but rather the line art comes from digitally enhanced pencil work, the manipulation and clean-up of most of the frames is satisfactory. From time to time, the boxes and speech bubbles appear messy and shaky, but since the focus is on the pictures and the text, this flaw can be overlooked. Besides in the *shojo* segment, the author's lack of access to a variety of screen tones also does not really undermine the quality of the work—in fact, the inclusion of this technique actually gave the comic an appropriate spectrum of greys to soften the stark black-and-white nature of the line art.

The stories and characters were overall enjoyable, too, considering the project's brevity and the lack of any solid character development outside of the first page. While the comic relies quite a bit on the reader's prior knowledge of the character's real life personas, this downfall is negligible since the intended audience is the teacher and the students in the class the comic is supposedly "set" in. The author also does a nice job of developing the characters through their overlaying, continuous banter and dialogue on top of the short narratives as well as their pseudo-fictional portrayal in the stories themselves. The biggest problem with this method of character development, however, is its negative impact on the organization of the pages. Text takes up a good majority of the space of this comic, which would realistically present problems since most readers of manga do not want to spend as much time as these pages require to get the gist of what is going on. All things considered, the comic is not bad considering the time devoted to it and the artist's current skill level, but it would still be interesting to see this project revisited and re-illustrated with more time and aptitude in the future.