Words and Images: The Narrative Techniques of Kabuki: Circle of Blood

In the afterword to David Mack's graphic novel Kabuki: Circle of Blood, Takashi Hattori, a longtime friend of Mack's writes, "So then, 'Kabuki: Circle of Blood', is it a ghost story? Is it a hero's journey? Is it a trip to a wonderland of enchantment? Is it a Sci/Fi thriller? Is it a story of a nation's history and future? Is it corporate espionage and political intrigue? Is it a family's tragedy? Yes. It is all of these." This quite accurately describes the scope and thematic density of Kabuki. Published serially by Image Comics beginning in 1994 and later collected into a single graphic novel, this comic by writer/artist/creator David Mack may be accurately described as many things, but perhaps most accurately as the story of a young woman as she confronts the tragedy of her family's past, and in so doing, recognizes and overcomes the restrictions of her society. This is a story that may have been told through a number of different media, yet David Mack chose to use the medium of the serially published comic book. This begs the question, "Why comics?" Or, put a different way, "How does David Mack utilize the capabilities and restrictions of the comic book medium to effectively develop his story and themes?" This is the question that this paper will attempt to address.

A comic book, as defined by Scott McCloud in his book, Understanding Comics, is a narrative that makes use of a combination of sequential pictorial art and textual prose [13]. Comics, for the most part, are comprised of written words and static images, which may be read in sequence to imply motion and narrative. Since the defining feature of comics is their combined use of words and pictures, the original question may
be rephrased, "How does David Mack combine text and images to effectively develop his story and themes?"

Kabuki: Circle of Blood is both the story of an individual, the protagonist Kabuki, and the story of a culture, near-future Japan. Each story is told in parallel, so it is appropriate that the narrative begins with a parallel structure. Kabuki is first introduced as a television personality, the face of governmental law, with panels in the shape of television screens running down the left side of the page. Beginning with a to-the-minute prediction of the weather, and ending with the line, "...little sister is watching you," this broadcast introduces Kabuki as a symbol of Japanese order, with the red sun of the Japanese flag framing her from behind in addition to being printed over her costume.

The broadcast, chillingly orderly, contrasts with the panels that run beside it, depicting the chaotic reality of the Japan of Mack's Kabuki. Whereas the panels of Kabuki's television broadcast are visually clean, and surrounded by white space, the panels depicting the city of Kyoto are visually dense and crowded. Here, Mack depicts a city of duality. The images portray ancient shrines and statues standing beside neon signs and skyscrapers. Intricately carved stone Buddhas and dragons coexist with storefronts advertising strip shows. The narrative text describes a world in which government and organized crime are corporate partners, and where erotic shows can be experienced live or through virtual reality. The porcelain features of Kabuki's ceremonial mask seen on the television screen are mirrored by the face of a nameless woman in the red light district. Narratively, the contrast between this chaos and the order implied by the television broadcast is obvious, as is the contrast between each individual panel of the
two narratives, but Mack goes a step further and leverages the very layout of the panels on the page to heighten this tension.

Top Row: The first two pages of Kabuki: Circle of Blood
Bottom Row: The first instance of the titular circle of blood
The placement of these panels creates an immediate visual tension. If the reader were to read the page in the standard way, from left to right, each narrative would interrupt the other. Reading the page vertically, from top to bottom, question of which narrative to read first arises. On the one hand, the broadcast panels are on the left side of the page, which would conventionally place them first in reading order. However, the visual balance of the page clearly rests on the right, with the panels detailing the seedy chaos of Kyoto. The striking areas of black and intricate visual detail draw the readers eyes to these panels, undermining the visual priority of the broadcast. This visual tension reflects the nature of Kabuki’s role in the government agency known as the Noh, which seeks to control the chaos of society by striking a balance between the government and organized crime. Kabuki’s role in the Noh is to serve as both the public face of Noh TV and as its deadly enforcer, assassinating crime lords who threatens to upset the balance of power. The red rising sun of the Japanese flag takes on a sinister aspect as it becomes the circle of blood that surrounds Kabuki as she kills to maintain an unstable status quo.

Thus does David Mack introduce the society in which Kabuki lives. Technology and tradition mesh together, commercialism permeates all aspects life, crime lords graduate from universities and run corporations, the government seeks to balance with the organized crime in a stalemate of violence, and no one questions the status quo out of fear. These aspects of society are reinforced through several visual metaphors, such as the intertwining of Japanese kanji with technological circuitry and numbers at the beginning of Scene 2. In this image, circuitry extends from the mask of Kabuki, forming the Japanese characters that make up the word “Noh.” The background is filled with
lines of numbers, which are interrupted by a circle containing more kanji. In Making
Comics, Scott McCloud identifies seven types of interaction between words and images
in comics [130]. The seventh of these is called Montage, and involves the combination
of words and images pictorially. This interaction is, according to McCloud, is emblematic
of the comic book medium. The image mentioned above is a perfect example of Mack’s
use of the comic book medium to develop his themes. The visual intersection of
tradition and technology is repeated several times throughout Kabuki, but perhaps the
most significant of these is the image of the Noh agent Butoh with a barcode on her
chest, and a barcode number that reads “SOUL”. The combination of the visual image
of the barcode and the written word of “soul” clearly articulate the state of the society in
which David Mack’s Kabuki takes place. In this society, anything, including the human
soul, may be digitized, and, furthermore, commercialized.
So how does David Mack incorporate the tale of Kabuki herself into this story of a nation digitized and commercialized? He does so through a combination of plot, comprising of Kabuki’s family history, and visual motifs of circles and images seen through glass. As the history of Kabuki’s family is revealed, several visual metaphors are introduced and reinforced. The sun, which previously represented nationalism and a circle of self-perpetuating violence, also becomes a symbol for Kabuki’s grandfather and father. The moon, meanwhile, becomes a symbol of Kabuki’s mother, named Tsukiko, or “moon child.”

The sun/moon dichotomy evolves throughout the story, representing war and peace, society and nature. The circle of blood, which is the sun, and therefore the nation of Japan itself, becomes visually entwined with images of commercialism, such
as the beginning of Act 2, where the circle of a blood spatter forms a half circle and is completed by a price tag for KFC, or in the middle of Act 4, where the sun in the Japanese flag becomes a pie chart on one of forty-seven TV screens (this references the tale of the forty-seven samurai, a classic and renowned tale of Japanese loyalty and honor), encouraging viewers to “[buy] into the nation’s corporate market”.

The moon, meanwhile becomes several things. On the one hand, it becomes a broken circle, representing the violent death of Kabuki’s mother, as well as Kabuki’s abuse at the hands of her father. The moon is also abstracted into the image of the silver, spherical urn which holds the ashes of Kabuki’s mother. The moon in this form serves as a counter-symbol to the sun of Japan. The urn’s (and therefore the moon’s) nature as a mirror couples with repeated references to Lewis Carroll’s *Through The Looking Glass* to become a symbol for insanity. Or, put another way, lunacy. In the first scene in which Kabuki gazes into the urn and recalls her mother’s tragedy, she thinks, “I’m just having one of my spells”. The word “lunatic” comes from “luna,” meaning moon, and originally referred to people who would go through spells of insanity, which were thought to be linked to the cycles of the moon [Online Etymology Dictionary]. Of course, as McKee points out in “What is Textual Analysis?,” lunacy and madness are often words that are simply attached to people who do not make sense of the world in the same way that society does [17]. In this light, the mirror moon becomes a more complex symbol. In some drawing classes, there is an exercise in which students are asked to draw from a photograph of a person. Once they are finished, they are then asked to draw the same photograph after the photo is turned upside down. When flipped right-side up, the students’ second drawings are revealed to be more accurate than their first
ones. The moral of this lesson is that when the world is inverted and made unfamiliar, we tend to see things as they truly are, as opposed to how we think they are. The moon serves a similar function for Kabuki as this exercise does for drawing students. This idea is reinforced later in the story, when Kabuki recalls her lessons in Zen Buddhism. Kabuki recounts how her sensei “spoke words of absurdity and instituted practices that defied all logic”. Visually tying this to the moon is the calligraphic expression of void, the essence of Zen Buddhism, which is a closed circle. This circle is latter seen forming the urn, with Kabuki suspended, fetal, inside of it.

Above: The Calligraphic expression of Void
Top: Void becomes the urn.
Bottom: The urn holds Kabuki like a womb.
David Mack uses reflections, or, put more generally, icons seen through glass, as a way of revealing the absurdities of society. Each Act of Kabuki begins with an image of a person viewing icons through glass. In the Prologue it is a man looking at erotic dancers through a window. Act 1 shows an old lady admiring shop window mannequins. Act 2 opens with a man looking at an alabaster statue of Colonel Sanders through a window. Act 3 depicts a teenage girl perusing windows full of male sex slaves. Act 4’s opening shows a man staring at a framed poster of Kabuki. Act 5 reveals a woman passing a window full of dummies modeling the costumes of Noh agents, and Act 6 begins with a dead gang member slumped beneath photos of Marilyn Monroe and a Stormtrooper. In Supersaturation, Gitlin writes that such icons viewed through glass screens offer an accessibility and simultaneous remoteness [21]. Gitlin notes that people envy such icons, admire them, and feel a sense of ownership over them. By setting up the motif of mirrors distorting the world and thus revealing the world as it truly is, David Mack suggests that the icons, the fashion dummies, the erotic dancers, are the grotesque reflections of the values and desires of commercial society. It is through the spherical urn at her mother’s grave that Kabuki eventually sees the absurdities of her society and learns to break free of them.

As Kabuki resolves herself to break the circle of blood and overthrow the corrupt, commercialized government, she recalls how her sensei encouraged her to think and act unconventionally. In these sequences, Mack reinforces the lessons of Kabuki’s teacher by visually defying comic convention. Amidst a matrix of rectangular panels, Mack places a semicircle of circles. These circles break the traditional flow of reading the page. Instead of reading left to right, the reader is encouraged to follow the page
counterclockwise, reading from right to left, then from top to bottom, and finally from left to right. The circles take on aspects of other visual metaphors, representing a sun eclipsed by locusts, the broken circle of the moon, and the calligraphic expression of void, before morphing into the circle of Kabuki’s lips as she internalizes her sensei’s lessons. Returning to the present, Kabuki is able to fully see the absurdity of her government, and the art style and panel layout reflect this. The art becomes distorted and surreal, and panels tilt and fall off the page before finally falling into complete disarray as Kabuki destroys the board of directors of Japan. Finally, David Mack brings the story to a close, as Kabuki shatters her mother’s urn, and lets the ashes blot out the sun, eclipsing the circle of blood.

Above: Kabuki recalls her sensei’s lesson
Top: Kabuki learns to defy convention
Bottom: Kabuki sees the board of directors in all its absurdity
Top: Kabuki overthrows the government.
Bottom: Kabuki frees her mother and breaks the circle.
So how does David Mack use the comic book medium to develop the themes of Kabuki? Through the use of text-image montage, literary allusion, layered visual metaphor, and through the subversion of conventions regarding page layout and reading order. Ultimately, David Mack creates his narrative conventions and language, combining words and images to guide the reader through Kabuki’s journey to overcome the farce of society and free herself from the circle of blood.
Works Cited


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