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New Horizons in English Studies 4/2019

LITERATURE

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Reading Images. Comics and its Multimodality in Cultural Communication, Interpretation and Translation

Abstract. A piece of work that requires the interplay of at least two different codes, e.g. written text and elements of design, is a multimodal text (Serafini 2011, 342). These include short or feature films, video games and comic books. The focus of this paper is comics, the non-interactive texts that, nevertheless, need a reader to be vivified (McCloud 1994, 36-37); a flexible platform for new ways of expression which often provides formidable challenges upon reception, interpretation, and translation.

Comics has become a respected literary form often compared to novels rather than pulp fiction which they used to be classified as. The most unique aspect of comic books is the form, which incorporates static visual images organised "in deliberate sequence" (ibid., 7-9) and text. Even though there are instances of comics with no text, it usually is present; without the imagery, however, it makes little or no sense and vice versa. Moreover, the connection between text and image as well as between the images themselves may be intricate and multi-layered.

Drawing on examples from classics such as *Maus*, *V for Vendetta*, *Peanuts* and the Asterix series, this paper expands on how the multimodal characteristics of the medium influence the reception and translation of comic books and graphic novels.

Keywords: multimodal translation, graphic novels, comic books, comics, literary translation

What constitutes multimodal texts is the interaction of content presented in at least two codes. These texts can be divided into two general groups: one combines visual and textual modes in print, i.e. in children's picture books, graphic novels, comic books, and manga; the other integrates visual, textual and (usually) aural modes in audiovisual form, for example, in film or video games. Frank Serafini maintains that

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7607-5744 DOI: 10.17951/nh.2019.4.102-117

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the need to "simultaneously process written text, visual images, and elements of design to construct meaning" (2011, 342) is another distinctive feature of the multimodal. This paper focuses on comics, which is its oldest (and can be argued to be the leading) representative. In order to clarify what category of the multimodal is discussed below, the notion of "a comic book" requires a precise definition.

Comics incorporates static imagery and written words to produce meaning. These elements are organised in a particular position and order to move a narrative forward. Rodolphe Töpffer, who is considered to have founded the groundwork for European comics in the 19th century, noticed that the blend of pictures and words is what constitutes the medium. It is still agreed upon today that, in comic books and graphic novels, "the drawing is an aspect of the writing, and the writing is an aspect of the drawing" (Chute and Dekoven 2015, 176). Nowadays, the authors of comic books still notice this interconnection: Art Spiegelman, the creator of groundbreaking *Maus*, refers to his craft as "picture writing", and Marjane Satrapi, who authored highly successful *Persepolis*, bills it as " narrative drawing" (ibid.). This is why the concept of comics being simply "sequential art" proposed by an influential cartoonist and writer Will Eisner is considered not sufficient by a more contemporary comic book author, Scott McCloud (1994, 7-9). He defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (ibid.), which gives justice to the presence of letters ("other images").

This explanation provides an adequate framework for reaching the objective of this paper which is to present an overview of potential difficulties in reception, analysis, and interpretation of comics caused by its being a multimodal medium. Many of those challenges manifest themselves with exceptional clarity upon translation; for this reason, a discussion of translation issues is included in many parts of this text.

A very effective way to illustrate the relevance of the "juxtaposition of images" is to consider the formidable formal constraints it presents to the translator working on a comic book. The "articulatory grammar" of comics includes speech bubbles with dialogue or thoughts, narrative boxes and captions (Zanettin 2008, 18). They all set spatial restrictions which translators need to take into account. Serafini also underlines the importance of composition in multimodal texts. He argues that the components of a text, ranging from the very drawings to the position of bubbles, the presence of gutters and shape or size of the frames, interact with one another. Thus, they create a particular denotative and connotative message for a recipient to decode and interpret (2011, 346).

Art Spiegelman's award-winning *Maus* is a good example of the abovementioned features of a comic book. It is a biography of Vladek Spiegelman and a story of his Holocaust ordeal, which, at the same time, is an autobiographical story of Vladek's son absorbing his family history and trying to comprehend his father's experience. The following excerpt serves as a representative example of the writing and drawing style used in *Maus*:

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Fig 1. A page from *Maus* (Spiegelman 2003, 150).

The composition is mostly conservative, with standard frames of similar size and uninterrupted gutters. Both images and text are rather dense and miniscule. These aspects cannot be considered exclusively from the aesthetic perspective. The layout of frames on the page and the composition of the frames, colours and contrast, the font size and the amount of text within a frame are not dictated by the author's whim or taste. These elements are integral storytelling tools inextricably entwined with the text itself. They complement one another not only in developing the plot and characters, but also in creating the atmosphere. In graphic novels that are supposed to represent reality this interplay is of paramount relevance, especially if the subject of the work is as controversial and substantial as that of *Maus*.

It is not just the story of one man's experience of the Shoah. Primarily, it is a depiction of passing forward the survivor's memory of it to the next generation and trying to

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make sense of it in the process. Throughout the book it becomes evident that such rationalisation and understanding the genocide is unachievable (Spiegelman 2003, 224; Baccolini and Zanettin 2008, 103). *Maus* is a story of living and acknowledging horror and its aftermath and it requires a platform that enables to present it as faithfully as possible. Words are not enough: "Language fails to convey the emotional distress associated with trauma; trauma resists language; and yet only a most accurate telling can begin to write trauma" (Baccolini and Zanettin 2008, 100). This is how Spiegelman explains the choice of the comic book as his preferred medium:

> It never could have occurred to me to tell it in any other form. Comics are just the idiom that naturally came with trying to fulfill a mandate I wasn't conscious of fulfilling when I went back to *Maus* in '78 – my mother's desire that I somehow tell the story. [...] What is most interesting about comics for me has to do with the abstraction and structurings that come with the comics page, the fact that moments in time are juxtaposed. In a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present – one doesn't displace the other the way it happens in film. (Spiegelman 2011, 165)

The aforementioned characteristics of images in *Maus* – the layout is mostly classic, the frames are packed with details and text, the images are black and white (with the prevalence of black) – were consciously used to depict trauma, fear and confusion connected with both Vladek's living with the memory of the Holocaust and Art's facing his cultural heritage. The composition was also intended to evoke a specific reaction among the recipients and to force a particular reading experience:

> It was a matter of finding how much drawn information each box could contain and imply in a flowing and easy-to-unpack way so that things remain prioritized. The story should unfold in the reader's head. It involved a lot of rejiggering each composition to make it work, and since I was drawing so small, it was sometimes difficult to make sure that the essentials stayed clear. Working in that scale kept me honest, because there just wasn't room for flourish and decoration. Somewhere between composition, eye-flow, and information content, the panels had their own demands, and had to be worked out individually and then with each other on the page. (ibid., 176)

This visual grammar adds to the oppressive and uneasy atmosphere of a story of a Holocaust survivor and, indeed, of the story of telling that story.

The composition in Craig Thompson's *Blankets* serves the same general purpose, although the effect is strikingly different to that in *Maus*. This coming-of-age novel depicts Craig's struggle with his religious upbringing, his relationship with his family and his first love affair with Raina, tainted with the feeling of guilt and warped by his idealised perception of the girl. The ways in which imagery interacts with the text and may influence the reader are manifested in the excerpts below:

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Fig 2. A page from the Polish edition of *Blankets* (Thompson 2010, 409).
Fig 3. A page from the Polish edition of *Blankets* (Thompson 2010, 436).

These are only two numerous instances in which the composition of the page reflects the emotional state of the protagonists. (They also inspire one to ponder the link between the book's title and the fact that Craig's relationships with people important to him tend to develop in beds.) The imagery and the composition oftentimes convey more emotions than what we get from the dialogue.

In the first extract, it is an exciting night-time game of make-believe emphasised by "dynamic" shapes of frames. What is crucial for the organisation of the page is that the frames reflecting the imagined storm are contrasted with the final frame, which shows Craig and his brother resting, with projections of tempest gone and replaced with the mundane reality of a bed in disarray. The scene conveys that Craig spends a lot of time with his younger brother, best friend and companion. They grow up together, share their fluctuating moods and the most private moments of their childhood. The artwork on this page tells much more about the characters' feelings and identities than the text.

The second excerpt also shows an important intimate situation from Craig's life, but of a quite different nature. He was invited to spend two weeks at Raina's house during the winter break. Her family, just like his, was devoutly Christian, so they concealed that they were more than friends. It was not overly cautious on their part: after

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the trip, Craig's mother said that had she known that Raina was her son's girlfriend, she would not have let him stay for that long (Thompson 2010, 485). Craig would sneak out of the guest bedroom and into Raina's room, where they would talk, cuddle and sleep curled up together, hidden from view and only God – in Craig's perspective – would see them and approve of their innocent relationship regardless of its physical side (ibid., 431). These were secret meetings of puppy love, yet already contaminated with a sense of guilt; it was a strong emotional experience for them both. Long depictions of those nights are full of evocative and sensual artwork; the excerpt above exemplifies it perfectly. Feelings of love and safety are reflected by visual representation of sounds and the gutters transforming into horns and surrounding the sleeping couple like a fairytale-like vine. The descriptive function served by imagery is clear: it complements the textual narration, shows us Craig's emotions and sensitivity, and finally, it stimulates the readers' imagination in a way words cannot.

At this point, it is obvious that images in comics play a pivotal role in narration. There is a wide range of different ways of drawing, pencilling, or inking; the style will always influence the story and, as a result, its reception. One of the most interesting and thought-provoking attempts to categorise all the elements of the "pictorial vocabulary" is Scott McCloud's pyramid (1994, 51).

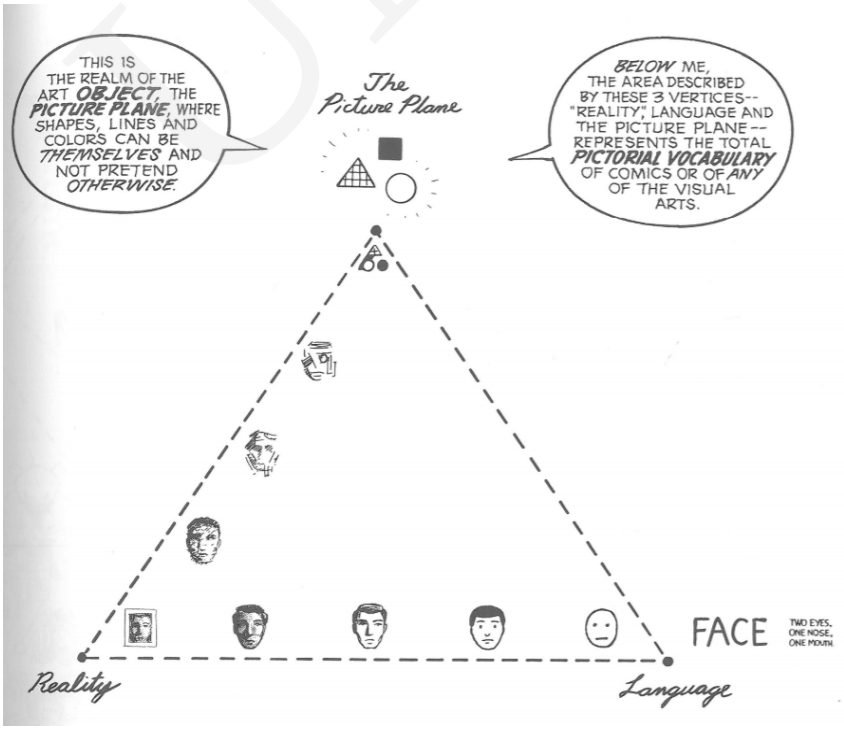


Fig. 4. McCloud's representation of pictorial vocabulary (1994, 51).

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It defines boundaries of visual representation. The corners constitute the extreme modes of ways to create images. Reality stands for the images that reflect reality with photographic accuracy. The Picture Plane is where shapes are not used to represent anything – they are simply shapes. Finally, Language which abandons imagery and uses letters to describe the world, which is the "ultimate abstraction" (ibid., 47). The lines between those corners constitute specific edges that also serve to define the pictorial vocabulary. The Retinal Edge connects Reality and the Picture Plane. Images that find themselves along this line stimulate visually; the Retinal Edge describes the accuracy of presenting reality from a photograph to abstract shapes and lines. Between Reality and Language there is the Representation Edge, which is related to meaning, from the careful depiction of real life in an image to a description of it. The Picture Plane and Language are connected with the Language Border. Images situated close to this line come from abstract ones at the top and, as they move towards Language, they become simpler or even simplistic. McCloud extends the Representation Edge beyond Language and ends it with a new point called Meaning. He connects it with the Picture Plane forming the Conceptual Edge, home of ideas presented in the most abstract form: with letters (ibid., 52-53).

In that space one can position any drawing according to the way it was contrived and produced. McCloud says that the viewer's identification with a comic book character, or, in other words, interaction with a recipient, is possible by contrasting the symbolic depiction of a character (close to the Language corner of McCloud's pyramid) with lifelike and detailed background (situated near the Reality corner). It enables readers to enter the world of a comic book and engage them in a story (ibid., 42-43). Consequently, he states that should he have drawn himself in a more realistic manner in his lecture-like graphic novel *Understanding Comics*, the readers would be much less inclined to follow his discourse, as they could not identify with a realistically pencilled figure of the lecturer/narrator (ibid., 36). In effect, this contrast foregrounds the characters and sets the focus on them. Even though McCloud's view can be disputed and there are comic books that do not follow that approach, it illustrates the importance of the relationship between images within the text in terms of receiving and interpreting the story.

As the examples above show, images cannot be translated, but they provide context for visual interpretation (Zanettin 2008, 12). They may put certain constraints on the scope of applicable translation solutions; the interplay between verbal and non-verbal modes of multimodal texts often compels the translator to adapt constrained translation, i.e. the translation proper of linguistic content conditioned by images and frame or page design (ibid., 20). Translators must then find appropriate solutions using their imagination and theoretical knowledge. For example, utterances in some languages, including Polish, usually take more space than English. Translators are often forced to leave something out of the original in order to meet the spatial constraints. Being aware of the message that a particular image conveys by non-verbal means, a translator will be able to consciously omit redundant clauses. Nonetheless, Zanettin points

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out that images, for example the size of speech bubbles, may be sometimes amended; yet, it is not a widely exercised practice, as such retouching is costly (ibid., 21).

Sometimes multimodal texts incorporate more modes of artistic expression than only images and text. An excellent example of such an intricate mixture of art forms is *Prelude* to book two of *V for Vendetta*. The sequence of images is not from left to right but from bottom to top. The frames have identical shape and size. They recapitulate the emotional state of some key characters with evocative imagery and the lyrics of a song called *The Vicious Cabaret*, which is, in fact, a summary of the entire book. The piece is performed by V, the anarchist terrorist fighting against the fascist British state in 1990s (which was a near-future in the first half of 1980s, when the comic was published in instalments). He is not only depicted as singing and playing the piano but the score is also included in between the rows of frames, so the reader is given the opportunity to "hear" the song. From the translator's point of view, it makes it possible to translate the lyrics of the song so that they fit the music – and, arguably, it ought to be done this way to fulfil the artistic multimodal richness of the scene.

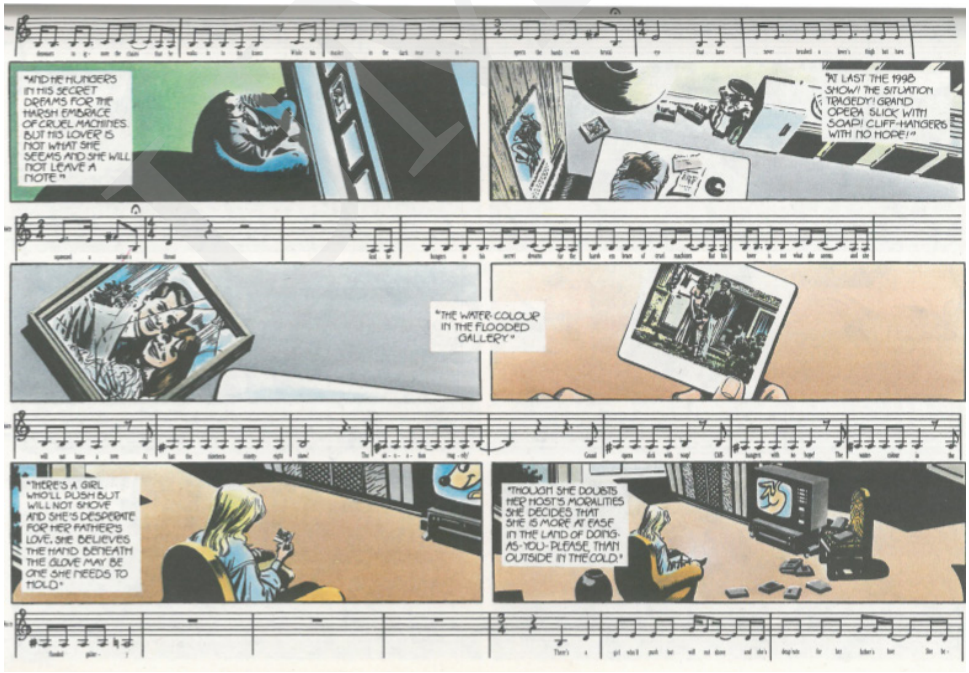


Fig 5. A fragment of *Prelude* to book two of *V for Vendetta*. (Moore and Lloyd 2005, 91).

This highly conceptual and intricate representation of events challenges the reader. To make the most of this sequence, one needs to "hear" the music from reading the notes, which requires specific kind of knowledge and skill, or find another way of listening to the music (it is possible to find the recording online). It is worth noting that,

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in any case, the translator working on this text is limited by the score and the rhythm of the original song and should produce a version that matches the tune, which may be considerably challenging.

Musical notes in comic books are a good example of symbolia: icons that represent something that is impossible to draw, for example smell or sound. As they are a part of the artwork, they are another formal constraint for a translator, but they also carry connotative meaning that may influence the process of translation. Those visual metaphors or pictograms are usually easy to decode – for example, motion lines indicate movement and stars over one's head can mean pain (Zanettin 2008, 18). The ability to understand some of these meanings is common within particular cultures, but not necessarily outside of them. For example, the symbolism present in manga differs significantly from that commonly used in Western comics; Zanettin provides examples of large, single drops of sweat expressing shock or veins popping up on a character's forehead representing anger or annoyance (ibid., 19). Nevertheless, there is a wide range of symbolia characteristic to the Western culture.

Philippa Rice's highly successful biographical comic book *Soppy* is a fairly random collection of scenes from a young couple's everyday life and provides a very good example of how crucial symbolia may be in telling and then understanding the events depicted. Consider the following sequence that also incorporates musical notes, but in a different way than the excerpt from *V for Vendetta*:



Fig. 6. A sequence from *Soppy*. (Rice 2015, 83).

The entire scene is shown in two frames. Text is present only in the first one. The facial expressions and poses of the characters connected with what the female character says are enough to convey a clear back-story: there has been a dispute as to what film to watch at the cinema that may be settled by the proposed solution. In the next

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frame we can see that, indeed, a solution is achieved. They are watching *Les Miseárables*, which is evident from the symbolia over the characters' heads: notes indicate that a musical is being screened. The characters' reactions are what makes this short scene funny: Philippa's boyfriend, who was apprehensive about watching *Les Misérables*, is visibly moved by it, but Philippa does not seem to be as emotionally invested. This shows that a narrative of or a pun in a comic strip or a graphic novel may be based on pictorial images and the use of words may be limited to a minimum.

The interaction of words and images may convey humour as well as the interplay of images and pictograms. See the following Krazy Kat comic by George Herriman:

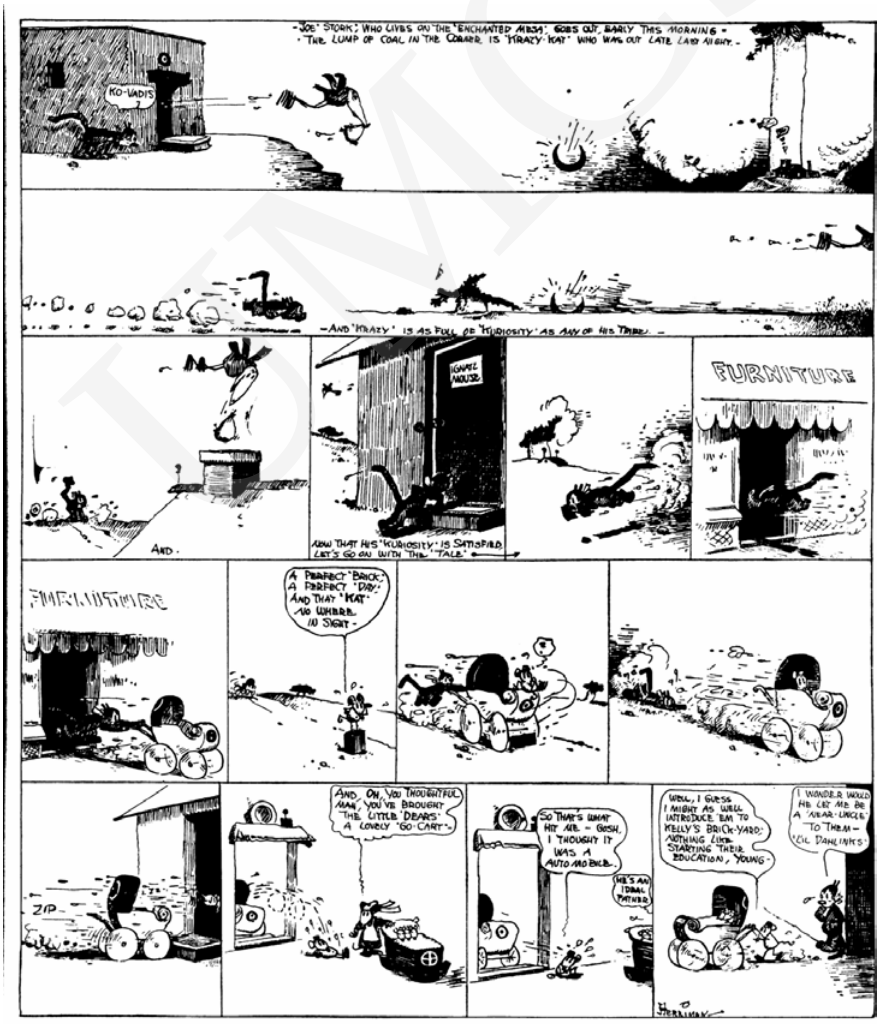


Fig. 7. *Krazy Kat (1916-06-11 – Wednesday)*. (Herriman 1916).

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In frame 7, we can see Ignatz Mouse expressing his satisfaction with the beautiful day and absence of Krazy Kat, who often makes Ignatz's life miserable. Little does he know that Krazy Kat approaches him from behind at full speed. In the following frame, a buggy strikes Ignatz and he falls inside as a result. The buggy is abruptly brought to a halt when it hits the threshold of Ignatz's house, which catapults the mouse out of it. Mother Mouse praises him for being so considerate and getting a new buggy for the baby mice. This is another joke, as we (as well as Ignatz) know that it was pure coincidence that Ignatz came into possession of the buggy and that he should take no credit for it. This shows how multimodality may convey humour.

An attempt to translate this story presents a series of interesting observations. A translator must be cautious not to lose the humorous impact of the original in the translated version also on the microlevel. For example, Ignatz says in frame 8 that "Kat is nowhere in sight—" (Herriman 1916).



Fig. 8. *Krazy Kat (1916-06-11 – Wednesday)*. Frame 8. (Herriman 1916).

That could be translated into Polish in numerous ways, including quite natural for the Polish language: "Kata nie ma w okolicy" (Kat is not in neighbourhood) or "Kata nie ma w pobliżu" (Kat is not in the surroundings). Inasmuch as it would be perfectly correct in terms of the message that Ignatz conveys, these expressions do not relate to the image in the way the original does. Herriman wittingly put the words "nowhere in sight" into Ignatz's speech bubble: Krazy Kat, in fact, is in sight, but in the reader's not Ignatz's. This choice of words is the base of the joke, and it has to be maintained in the translation, either by "Kata nie ma w zasięgu wzroku" (Kat is not in the scope of sight) which would be too long for the small bubble, or "Kata nie widać" (Kat is not seen) which refers to Kat (not) being visible and is sufficiently short.

The word-image interplay may also be a platform for conveying cultural references. *Le Grand Fossé* is the twenty-fifth volume of *The Adventures of Asterix* It tells a story of a certain village in Gaul which is divided in two parts, both politically,

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because of disagreements between two chiefs, and physically, by an enormous ditch running across it. The introduction of one of those two leaders provides a perfect example of cultural referencing:



Fig. 9. *Le Grand Fossé.* Frame 4. (Uderzo 1980).

This first appearance of Ségrégationnix in the book mirrors the famous painting of Louis XIV, the Sun King, where he adapts a similar pose.



Fig. 10. *Louis XIV of France* by Hyacinthe Rigaud (Rigaud 1701).

Moreover, Ségrégationnix says "Le village, c'est moi" which translates into "I am the village." It is a paraphrase of probably the most famous quote by the Sun King, "L'état, c'est moi," which means "I am the state." It is likely that the quote is what establishes a firm reference between Ségrégationnix and the figure of Louis XIV; the character's pose only amplifies the royal allusion. Would the reference be as evident if it had not been for the quote? Let us compare the original with two translated versions of frame 7 of *Le Grand Fossé*: into English and into Polish:

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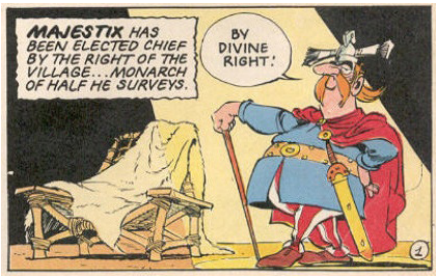


Fig. 11. *Asterix and the Great Divide.* Frame 4. (Uderzo 2002).



Fig. 12. *Wielki rów.* Frame 4. (Uderzo 2012).

In the English version, the paraphrase is completely ignored and replaced by a typically British phrase "by divine right", which states that king's ruling power comes from God. It also removes the reference to Louis XIV. Only the most perceptive readers will notice the similarity between the postures of Ségrégationnix and Louis XIV. In the Polish translation, the reference is preserved. "Osada to ja" (Village is me) is a close paraphrase of the Polish equivalent of King Louis's famous saying, which is "Państwo to ja" (State is me). The Polish translation is closer to the original than the English one and, at the same time, it makes it easier for the target text reader to understand the cultural reference.

Another example of cultural referencing in comics is the following episode of the iconic *Peanuts*, a ground-breaking comic strip created, illustrated and written by Charles M. Shulz:



Fig. 13. A page from *The Complete Peanuts 1950-1952*. (Schultz 2004, 148).

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Cultural references are manifested through a number of aspects in the story. First, the very nature of the game played by the characters, which is based on a part of the history of the United States – the reality of the so-called Wild West, with Indians attacking cowboys and troopers. The idea of the game is, presumably, clear to the young foreign recipient, so it does not need explanation of any kind on the translator's part.

What amplifies the historical nature of the pastime is the language used by Charlie Brown, the protagonist, and his friends: the slightly changed (probably due to Charlie's mishearing of the song) lyrics of *Old Folks at Home*, the official state song of Florida, and the depiction of the characteristic South-American pronunciation in writing, e.g. "Ol' pal, ol' buddy". These may be challenging upon translation, as this variant of American English doesn't have sufficient counterparts in other languages. Another difficulty is conveying the child's mistake made while he wanted to use a difficult phrase that fit the game: "treace peaty", which, naturally, was supposed to be "peace treaty". Translating this spoonerism may be problematic. In Polish, for example, this error in speech is usually used consciously to create two-word phrases that, after decoding – switching the first letters or morphemes between the words – produce an obscene expression. Making an error of that kind involuntarily is not typical among Polish children. The possibilities of compensation of any linguistic mistake that would reflect the one from the original are limited due to the events depicted in the frames and the cultural context they provide. Whatever solution the translator applies, it must be consistent with those limitations and the size of the speech bubbles. Finally, the comic brims with onomatopoeias, which also should be replaced with exclamations natural for children who would read the translation that would fit in the bubbles.

The multimodal interplay between words and images may adapt more serious forms. *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, discussed above from a different perspective, is arguably one of the most challenging comic books in terms of translation. It is set in America, where Art Spiegelman interviews his father, Vladek Spiegelman, taking the full confession of Vladek's experience of the Holocaust. Considerable parts of the book are retrospections taking place in Poland in 1930s and 1940s. The fact that the book was originally written in English poses a huge linguistic challenge, especially for a Polish translator. An English-speaking reader is aware of the fact that parts of the book set in Poland are "translated" into English by Art Spiegelman himself. Vladek speaks fluent English – which represents Polish, his mother tongue – in the scenes in Poland, but his actual English, which he speaks in scenes set in the USA, is clumsy. Once the text is translated into Polish, a Polish reader may assume that, originally, Art interviewed his father in Polish. Vladek was a Pole and he spoke the language; the assumption that his son also possesses this skill is fair. Why then Vladek's Polish becomes broken when he speaks it in the USA? The form of a comic limits the possibilities of indicating the language a given character speaks. Unlike in a novel, it is impossible to add a line such as "he said in Polish" in the narrative, because the images are the "narrative" in a graphic novel. Nevertheless, it is crucial for translators into all languages to preserve the unnatural English in which Vladek narrates the story. This variation of English

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becomes the language of telling and it also represents the senselessness of the Holocaust. Vladek's non-standard English is an allegory of Shoah (Baccolini and Zanettin 2008, 100). Considering the gravity of the subject and the text's position in the modern literary canon (it is the only graphic novel to have received Pulitzer Prize to date), this quality ought to be conveyed in translation.

That being said, *Maus* is a book that, for this and many more reasons, may require paratext. Upon publication of its first chapters it provoked a heated debate and fierce controversies. Is it appropriate to talk about the Holocaust through a medium considered trivial and childish? Why were the people depicted as animals? Why are Poles presented as pigs considering the widely negative cultural connotations of this animal? Should it be considered a non-fiction work, or is most of it Spiegelman's creation or interpretation? These and many more questions found their answers in a piece of paratext so monumental that it was published as a separate volume: *Metamaus* an interview with the author accompanied by photographs, facsimiles of the early sketches for *Maus*, historical documents and many more.

Arguably, comic books and graphic novels are the most complex literary texts to translate, as, upon the process of creating different linguistic versions of such texts, the links between language, image and culture must be carefully considered (Zanettin 2008, 23). Serafini stresses the importance of media literacy, i.e. the ability to decode, interpret, and enjoy mass media, in processing products of pop culture (2011, 347). Without it, the cautious and mindful reception, let alone translation, of comic books and graphic novels is not possible. The essential components of visual grammar and pictorial vocabulary, including composition, perspective, foregrounding or symbolia, must be appreciated and analysed with care, just like the text of all multimodal content, as images and words are irreversibly interlinked creating complex, multilayered meanings.

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