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Novel-Based Comics

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The comic adaptation of literary classics has already formed its own tradition. It started to rouse general interest with the success of Albert Kanter Lewis' series *Classics Illustrated*, which published 167 titles of world literature from 1941 to 1969 (cf. Horn 204). The series was designed to improve the image of comics, which suffered more and more from the assertion that young comic readers would more likely be drawn toward crime and even violence as a result of the "atrocities" depicted in particular in horror magazines (cf. Horn 859–913). *Classics Illustrated* sought the approval of education experts and parents alike by using established literary works as a basis for the series; it presented comics as a way of introducing children and teenagers to the world of literature while retaining the concept of action- and suspense-driven storylines to attract the young readers' interest.

With copies selling by the million and several reprints from different publishers until the end of the 20th century, the concept proved successful. Comics were even used as teaching material in literature classes which led to several publishers' specializing in producing comics designed for use in schools, along with teachers manuals to optimize the medium's potential in education (e.g., the Hodder & Stoughton series *Livewire Graphics*).

The concept of incorporating familiar storylines, motives and protagonists of the literary pool was widely used in other popular series as well — in the Disney universe alone hundreds of literature adaptations were published, especially by Italian artists whose works were also frequently translated for circulation in the German-speaking market. This development coincided with the rise of the comic artists' lobbying for greater acceptance of the medium as a form of art, and teaming up comic art with literature seemed a promising way to gain further respect.

In recent years artists have often been striving to reach an adult audi-

ence by adapting literature and consequently have distanced themselves from the concept used in *Classics Illustrated*. That series, while it relied on the status of canonized works, offered artwork of variable quality and was designed to convey the greatest amount of information possible at a rapid pace while reducing the storyline to a simple thread that could be followed easily. Thus comics were created whose famous titles were sometimes not more than vessels containing horror stories quite similar to those that were the reason for so much concern in the United States of the 1950s. The 89th issue of *Classics Illustrated*, an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, offered nothing more than the story of an axe-murderer trying to avoid discovery. A central element of the novel, the sudden bouts of regret which lead to the murderer giving himself up to the police, are only shown in two quite unexpected pages at the end of the story. In the essay accompanying the comic in the 1997 version, Andrew J. Hoffman points out that the murderer does not do justice to Dostoevsky's Raskolnikow; the essay therefore tries to supply the information on *Crime and Punishment* the comic version does not offer (*Crime and Punishment* 55). Considering this and other daring enterprises of the series, for example, summing up Goethe's *Faust II* in merely ten pages (*Classics Illustrated* Nr. 167), it is understandable that comic artists yearning for critical acclaim showed little interest in being connected to this series, choosing instead to display open criticism.

With the rise of what has been termed the "graphic novel" which backed the development of book-length comics dealing with "serious" matters, the interest in collaboration with literature increased once more. The main reasons for adapting literature in comics were similar to those that had led to *Classics Illustrated*: improving the perception of the medium by visualizing literature and thus profiting from the esteem paid to the latter. This could be combined with the greater probability of commercial success of the comics due to their connection to already widely known titles. But—in contrast to previous projects like *Classics Illustrated*—these new adaptations of literature presented content and artwork worthwhile for an adult audience and thus aimed at demonstrating the comics' potential for telling complex stories in a unique style—as an independent form of narrative visual art.

In the early 1990s, the comic artist Art Spiegelman convinced his editors to try to collaborate with "some serious novelists to provide scenarios for skilled graphic artists" (Spiegelman, *City of Glass*, "Preface"). This resulted in the adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli in 1994. In the adaptation's introduction Spiegelman stated "that the goal here was not to create some dumbed-down 'Classics Illustrated' versions, but visual 'translations' actually worthy of adult attention" (Spiegelman, *City of Glass*, "Preface"). Similar views were expressed by Jules Feiffer in his intro-

duction to Peter Kuper's adaptations of a collection of Kafka's short stories. Feiffer calls this project a good idea "(e)specially for those of us who detest the *Classics Illustrated* concept, which is to upgrade the image of comic art by cross-dressing it with culturally significant heavyweights" (*Give it up!* 3).

Together with other interesting adaptations of literature since the early 1990s (especially the series of Stéphane Heuet based upon Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Posy Simmonds' *Gemma Boverly*, Martin Rowson's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and Will Eisner's discussion of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* in *Fagin the Jew*), the comics by Kuper and Karasik/Mazzucchelli will serve as examples for the following analysis of general techniques used in comic adaptation. This will be followed by the discussion of a probably less well-known comic from the German-speaking market, Isabel Kreitz's version of Uwe Timm's *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst* (The Discovery of Curried Sausage).

TECHNIQUES OF ADAPTATION

The techniques used in comic adaptation are similar to those used in other media crossovers and may be compared to preparing a drama for the stage. Decisions must be made considering the general plot, especially if dealing with complex structures involving different narrative levels; storylines have to be connected, abridged or omitted; a pool of characters has to be established and maybe characters have to be merged to reduce the *dramatis personae*.

Deciding on the incorporation of original text into the comic version is another crucial step, as it plays an important role in defining the comic's style. Using large portions of original text may automatically lead to employing a narrative strategy similar to the original, for example by establishing a narrator's point of view. A narrator's voice may be inserted using text-only panels, creating a similar but arguably less convincing effect than voice-overs used in film. But, generally speaking, a text narrated in the first person is inevitably drawn toward a third person point of view in the adaptation, even if parts from the original are prominently featured in the comic. This is due to the almost unavoidable graphic depiction of protagonists referred to as "I," which widens the gap between reader and narrator and makes identification and the classical perception through the eyes of the first person narrator more difficult.

Text used in speech balloons is usually derived from dialogue in the original, from free indirect speech or context. The artist's task of conveying the original's information is often met by manipulating the available space and

employing the tools of the trade: panel-management, cuts, changes of perspective, timing, and imagery in the chosen style.

A rather obvious difference between adaptations and other comics lies in product presentation. The adaptations make frequent use of paratexts (forewords, introductions and afterwords) explaining the choice to adapt literature by discussing motivation and/or methods. A section offering information on the adapted text is often included for educational purposes especially in the *Classics Illustrated* series. Other adaptations may contain further information on the comic's topic.

The various reasons for adapting literature in comics are closely related. If the interest lies in content, the original is chosen because it offers a good and sound story and/or addresses a topic of special interest. This is of course combined with the obvious marketing advantages of being linked to a well-known title and thus hopefully appealing to a greater audience. Adaptations range from detailed retelling to being "loosely based on" or just "inspired by" the original. They may use all or only some storylines of the original, or they might even concentrate on a single character (not necessarily the protagonist of the original). The adaptations can transport events to another setting or present sequels of the original. The possibilities of manipulating the original material are indeed numerous. If the artist wants to influence public opinion on sensitive issues not addressed in the original, they may be shown in new light in the comic version by changing the point of view and expanding or rewriting the original storyline.

An interesting example of this strategy is Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* (2003), which sets out to tell the life story of Moses Fagin, the infamous villain of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. As Eisner states in his foreword: "I was examining folktales and literary classics for possible graphic adaptation, [and] I became aware of the origins of the ethnic stereotypes we accept without question. Upon examining the illustrations of the Original editions of *Oliver Twist*, I found an unquestionable example of visual defamation in classic literature" (4).

Eisner's comic builds on the rich tradition of Dickens-related reception. It deliberately cites the works of George Cruikshank, the original illustrator of *Oliver Twist* (see *Fagin the Jew* 125), and sheds new light on the reception of the cultural influence of Dickens' work by fleshing out Fagin's character by constructing a backstory for him that bears obvious similarities to *Oliver Twist*'s fate. Eisner thus changes the novel's content to fit his ends by simplifying the plot related to the original protagonist, *Oliver Twist*, and by omitting some of the negative characteristics of Fagin, but he retains the main events and shows them in the context of Jewish life and anti-Semitism in 19th-century Britain.

Another creative example of a somewhat similar strategy is Posy Sim-

monds' *Gemma Bovary* (1999). This comic relates the story of a young English woman who tries to start a new life in rural France in the 1990s. Unfortunately, her life seems to be constantly influenced by her name that bears a striking resemblance to that of Gustave Flaubert's heroine Emma Bovary. The parallels and differences between the stories of these two women form an intriguing pattern of links as *Gemma Bovary* tries to break away from the inevitable fate set by the original.

As a part of the reception of a major oeuvre, comic adaptations may contribute to the reception of a known work of literature by illustrating certain parts or even a complete series of novels in order to introduce new readers to the original novel or add further interest for those already familiar with the book. Starting out close to the original text (often featuring many direct citations), such a comic offers a complementary "view" on the events by illustration. Paintings, cities, buildings and landscapes featured in the original may be "cited" by graphic reproduction, a method frequently employed in Stéphane Heuet's adaptation of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.^{*} Starting in 1998, Heuet has so far published four albums that are based on parts of the first two novels, *Du côté de chez Swann* and *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. So far roughly 350 pages of text have been adapted, filling 216 comic pages — in his last album almost reaching the unusual rate of one comic page per page adapted.

Heuet has adopted the narrative structure of the original text and is closely following the sequence of events, using special panels for inserted original text. It is easy to trace Proust's text in Heuet's comic as he does not merge different scenes. Considerable gaps in the citation of sentences from the original occur only in long passages describing the scenery whose function is largely taken over by the images provided by Heuet. All the text in the comic is taken straight from the original; minor changes occur only in form of abridgements (especially in the case of extended metaphors, comparisons, digressions and off-topic reflections) or altered pronouns and conjunctions. Speech balloons are filled with text from dialogue in the novels, from free indirect speech, or with sentences from the context given in the original. In album I (*Combray*) Heuet omits only two scenes from the original text: Ms. Swann's father is not portrayed and the dialogue between the narrator's mother and Ms. Swann is not given but it figures in the comic nonetheless as they are seen talking in the background of a picture (page 9, panel 3) until their conversation is interrupted by the same sentence that interrupts it in the original text (page 9, panel 4; cf. Proust 29).

^{*} See, for example, the use of *La Charité de Giotto*, which features prominently in Proust's novel (72) and also appears in Heuet's first album (page 34, panel 7).

In addition to the manifold ways that famous literary plots are manipulated to create innovative graphic novels, literature is sometimes used in comics to provide a basis for rather experimental visual expression. An experimental graphic vocabulary is then used to interpret the text while relying on its familiarity to the reader. Graphic associations and the visualization of metaphors and comparisons offer the reader additional information as well as the possibility of re-reading a familiar text while at the same time presenting the medium's potential. The use of a well-known text also strengthens the comic artist's control of the narrative as he is able to manipulate likely expectations. Examples of such graphically innovative, novel-based comics are Peter Kuper's Kafka adaptations, Martin Rowson's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1996), or Karasik/Mazzucchelli's *City of Glass*, which all make extensive use of flexible panel management and hard contrasts in black and white to illustrate abstract concepts with creative imagery. Karasik and Mazzucchelli highlight the different narrative and emotional levels of the original in a compact and effective way by using different graphical styles as their characteristics and interlink those levels, side by side, on a single comic page. Rowson's stylized incorporation of 18th-century paratexts (such as erratum plates or dedications) links the comic with the original while it establishes an intriguing alienation effect.

A CLOSER LOOK: *DIE ENTDECKUNG DER CURRYWURST*

Isabel Kreitz's comic version of Uwe Timm's novella *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst* was published in 1996 under the title *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst. Nach einem Roman von Uwe Timm*. The novella relates the story of 43-year-old Lena Brücker who hides the deserted German Navy soldier Bremer in her apartment during the last days of World War II. All of this is told by Lena years later, as an old woman, to the narrator of the novella. The main interest of Timm's text is that Bremer — who meets Lena Brücker by chance while being transferred to Hamburg to serve in the already lost battle in eastern Germany, spends the night at her apartment and subsequently accepts her offer to hide him — is kept unaware of the capitulation of the German forces, as Brücker, 19 years his senior, does not want to lose her young lover. When Bremer finally leaves, Brücker starts a successful take-away as a result of her "discovery" of the now famous curried sausage.

The comic version by Isabel Kreitz, which transforms the 220 pages of the original into 45 pages, is true to the text as far as the overall narrative structure is concerned. The frame narrative, which relates the narrator's search for Lena Brücker and their subsequent interviews, is retained but consider-

ably abridged. It figures only briefly at the beginning and the end of the comic and in four short inserted scenes. The narrator is visualized, but fulfills his narrative function only in the opening and closing scenes of the comic. In the frame and main narrative, the pool of characters is reduced to those absolutely necessary; the storyline is condensed accordingly and often combines similar scenes from different sections of the original text into a single event on a comic page.

With the exception of the frame narrative, all written information is conveyed through speech balloons. The text is taken directly from dialogue or free indirect speech of the original and occasionally combined with text derived from the general context. Again, abridgements seem inevitable. The language of the comic is slightly less formal than the novella's. Northern German dialect is more often employed and the dialogue between the main characters is more casual and implicates a first-name basis right from the start.

Each page in the comic consists of four regular rows of panels with one notable exception: the opening scene of the main narrative that shows a street of war-time Hamburg covering half the page. The number of panels per page generally ranges from six to eight, except for three pages where the narrative flow is changed by increasing the number of panels per page to ten to create suspense or illustrate turning points (see Kreitz 24; 33; 43).

The realistic style drawn in black and white employed by Kreitz recalls war-time photographs. The absence of visual metaphors such as sweat drops indicating fear or excitement and the reserved use of speed lines add to the impression of calm realism. Lena Brücker's piercing gaze creates an impression of suspicion and exhaustion held in check by stern determination, occasionally softened by fleeting moments of happiness (see Kreitz 25; 44; 45). One unusual formal device stands out against the straight realism of Kreitz's comic: The adoption of a passage of the novella in which the events that lead directly to the discovery of the "Currywurst" are presented in a condensed way as opposites juxtaposed: Despair and hope, regret and joy, loss of hard-to-come-by goods and the discovery of a recipe; failure and new beginning (see Kreitz 42 in comparison to Timm 211). Other scenes that could have led to surrealistic images — such as Bremer's account of his dream after first having eaten curry, when he dreamt he was a tree being tickled to fits of laughter by the wind (see Timm 98) — were not included in Kreitz' version.

This seemingly simple realism of the comic version is somewhat deceptive. For a clearer understanding of the potential of the adaptation in question, a closer look at the text is necessary. Pages 30 and 31 of the comic version of *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst* skillfully condense several passages of the novella and use the material to prepare one of the story's turning points. In panel 1 (Kreitz 30), Bremer is seen smoking one of the cigarettes Lena Brücker

has brought him. His comment on its quality is a direct citation, "Meine Güte! Wer solche Zigaretten macht, gewinnt auch Kriege!" ("Good Lord! People who produce such cigarettes will win wars!" Timm 138). This is unwittingly ironic as he is unaware, due to Lena's deception, that he is not smoking a German cigarette but a British brand.

Panel 2 refers to Bremer's habit of following the war's "progress" on a map after he has been led to believe by Brücker that Germany has joined forces with the western Allies against Russia.* The ironic potential of this situation, which is referred to in the novella as the "Great War Council of the Admiral's" ("Große Lagebesprechung beim Admiral," Timm 138), is omitted. Panel 4 once again features a direct citation ("Die Wende," Timm 114).

Panels 5, 6, and 7 show Bremer's surprise at discovering that black-market business is conducted rather openly in the streets, an unusual occurrence for times of war (cf. Timm 149). This leads to his suspecting that something is amiss with the information he gets from Brücker. The following nine panels then illustrate the violent struggle following Brücker's refusal to obtain a radio for Bremer. The dialogue used here is constructed from the original's free indirect speech and reduced to a minimum. Bremer starts cursing, knocks everything off the table and confronts Brücker, who is driven against the wall with outstretched hands and open, empty palms. While he is speaking of execution, he is shown in a menacing pose, his body nearly crushing the panel's frame, his right hand pointed at Brücker as if he were about to shoot her. The cut from this panel to the next is difficult to follow as Brücker is suddenly behind him, forcing him to the floor.

In the novella, Bremer's fear for his life is confronted with Brücker's nonchalant soothing, which is based on her knowledge that there are no more Nazi execution squads in the streets. Unable to understand her cool reaction, Bremer enters into a screaming fit, throws the dishes off the table and tries unsuccessfully to leave the apartment. The door is always kept locked by Brücker. Venting his aggression against the closed door, Bremer is overpowered by Brücker until he calms down (cf. Timm 153).

This example clearly shows the strategy used by Kreitz. Wartime experience is emphasized in the comic. The unavoidable condensation of material in a relatively short adaptation made it necessary to simplify the story of

*The text Kreitz uses here is mostly derived from information given indirectly in the novella. There are, however, a few significant deviations from the original. In the novella, Brücker offers the information that she has heard that Montgomery was advancing toward the East ("Sie hatte in der Kantine gehört, daß Montgomery weiter nach Osten vorrückte" Timm 138). Kreitz transfers this honor to Winston Churchill. It is possible that this was a deliberate choice, supposedly because the British field marshal, Montgomery, would be less well known to a broader audience than the prime minister. Yet in panel 3 Montgomery is referred to, taking the place of General Eisenhower in the original (Timm 138), which leads to the assumption that the change is probably due to a genuine mistake on Kreitz' part.

a complex woman in times of war who, after finally having a fulfilling relationship, quite understandably tries to make it last a little longer. In the comic, the relationship as a whole is kept as unproblematic as possible. Complications are omitted or understated. The heavy sexual allusions of the original are significantly reduced and the age difference between the protagonists is not noticeable visually.*

The comic's focus is certainly on Germany at the end of World War II, showing life in a bombed city in 1945. The struggle for survival in the aftermath of the war is combined with a love entanglement. Accordingly, the comic offers an additional 12-page documentation by the journalist Frank Giese about Hamburg in this period, underlining the book's inherent claim of being serious and informative (see Kreitz 50–61). The parallels between the concept used by Kreitz and *Classics Illustrated* are obvious.

The comic version of *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst* is what one could call a "straight war-time story" set in Nazi Germany and in the weeks immediately after the war. The Nazis are the evil Nazis. The finer shades of the original's wide range between open support of and resistance to the Nazi regime are largely omitted. The heroine is an independent, resourceful, strong woman, who is critical of the regime, courageous and passionate, but not larger than life. From the ashes of war rises new life, and Lena Brücker's struggle for survival and her eventual success mirror that of her country.

The war is over. Its result: curried sausage.

CONCLUSION

The comic adaptation of literature has formed a rich tradition offering numerous titles. The connection with "culturally significant heavyweights" has its dangers, of course — staying too close to the original may lead to results that do not improve the status of comics. The reductive concept of *Classics Illustrated* is still a tempting one, as it has proven its commercial potential, but the cooperation of comic art and literature has far more to offer than mere illustration, even if, unfortunately, comic adaptations are still frequently presented as such. The original's title and its author are usually emphasized while the work of the comic artist is mentioned only in a by-line. Notable exceptions are the comics by Eisner, Kreitz, Rowson and Simmonds.

At their best, comics adaptations transform the chosen text into a new

* The pictorial rendition makes Brücker look younger and Bremer older than they are in the novella. The age difference is only once spoken of directly in the comic and then even incorrectly as the comic's Lena Brücker states in retrospect that Bremer was nearly 15 years her junior (Kreitz 27) instead of the 19 years that divide them in the novella.

independent piece of art that gains its own momentum when the links to the original are skillfully manipulated in order to form a pattern of intricately woven ties. A novel may be an auspicious starting point—but only if the journey leads to the creation of a comic that makes full use of the graphic medium's potential.

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