

# Comics of the New Europe

Reflections and Intersections

*Martha Kuhlman & José Alaniz (eds)*



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# Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections

**STUDIES IN  
EUROPEAN COMICS  
AND GRAPHIC NOVELS**

**7**

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*Edited by*  
*Martha Kuhlman & José Alaniz*

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Martha Kuhlman  
and José Alaniz

## General Introduction: Comics of the 'New' Europe

The official history of comics is a history of frustration. Of unrealized potential. Of artists who never got the chance to do that magnum opus ... of stories that never got told ... a medium locked into a ghetto and ignored by countless people who could have made it sing ... (206).

Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*

Near the end of New Zealand cartoonist Dylan Horrock's first graphic novel *Hicksville* (2001), journalist Leonard Batts explores Kupe's imagined library of comics *that might have been* if artists and cartoonists had had complete artistic freedom. In this fictional library, works by Winsor McCay and Rodolphe Töpffer sit alongside comics by Pablo Picasso and Federico García Lorca; there is no differentiation between "high" and "low," or indeed between "minor" countries and superpowers. Comics are valued for their artistic merit, regardless of the nationality or social status of the artist. This is an admirable ideal for Horrocks, who finds himself in a distinctly marginal position as a cartoonist from New Zealand, but his predicament is comparable in some ways to the invisibility of graphic narrative from what some had termed the "other" Europe, but we have elected to call the "new" Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Which countries are we talking about, exactly? Primarily, countries whose governments fell under the control of the Soviet Union following WWII: East Germany (German Democratic Republic or GDR), Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Yugoslavia under Josef Tito, as an independent socialist state, represents a special case but nonetheless shares some experiences in common with the other socialist countries, while also marked by the devastating legacy of civil wars as the country disintegrated in the early 1990s. Ukraine is an exception, but can be understood (as of the writing of this introduction) as engaged in a colonial struggle



with the Russian Federation since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (and actually long before that). Although there are histories of comics available in the respective native languages of the countries we consider, there has not been, as yet, a comprehensive transnational overview of the region in English-language comics studies.

Despite claiming to offer surveys of “world comics,” global histories of graphic narrative replicate some of the aporias present in the relatively impossible category of “world” or “global” literature.<sup>2</sup> Even more narrowly defined surveys of European comics focus primarily on the “Franco-Belgian” tradition, thus swiftly setting aside any comics production to the East of Germany.<sup>3</sup> This omission is unfortunate—not only do these countries have national traditions of comics, but they have experienced an unprecedented burgeoning of new work by younger artists since 1989. Part of the difficulty, at least from an Anglo-American perspective, is that a great deal of this work is either hard to find, or is simply not translated.<sup>4</sup> In fact, half of the works discussed in this book are not yet available in English translation, but our hope is that this scholarship will pique the interest of academics, publishers, and the general public to discover exceptional examples of graphic narrative currently only known within their respective countries. Moreover, we would like to see more translations in and among these countries themselves, given that their comics scenes are not necessarily well-known even to each other. European comics festivals and a few international comics publications such as *Stripburger* (Slovenia), *Aargh* (Czech Republic), and *Kuš* (Latvia) have made admirable strides in this direction, but much more can be done in the academic arena. Currently, *European Comic Art* and the *International Journal of Comic Art* represent the best sources in English for comics studies on European cartoonists, and it is our intention to build upon these examples in this volume (indeed, some of our contributors have been recruited from these sources).

Then there is the question of terminology—we might have referred to these countries as “East” European, but this term has shifted towards the pejorative connotation of “Eastern Bloc,” given that these peoples were formerly dominated by the Soviet Union. Even among those living in these countries, the “East” is often considered inferior to the West. Writing in 2018 about the Polish context, Tomasz Zarycki argues that “East” is comparable to Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism insofar as it designates the “uncivilized” other to the more “civilized” West. In Polish discourse, “the East plays the role of a negative, significant other ... it is backward, aggressive, dangerous, and unpredictable” (Moskalewicz and Przybylski 4). Negative stereotypes persist in the Czech Republic as well, as the Czechs think of themselves as the most “Western” compared to Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria: “Feeling the East of the West and the West of the East, and torn between both, they are constantly trying to get rid of their burden of ‘Eastness’” (Moskalewicz and Przybylski 4). On the other hand, Anita Starosta argues in *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, and Postimperial Difference* (2016), that the designation “Eastern

Europe” should not be abandoned, but reinvented and recuperated as a tool to challenge Eurocentrism (10-11).

In the 1980s the term “Central Europe” gained traction, primarily due to Milan Kundera’s 1984 essay, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” in which he proposed that the notion of a “central” Europe be based on a shared cultural heritage dating to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But is this designation purely geographic or more symbolic? As Máté Zombory argues, the location of the center is not as objective as it may seem, since the politics of cultural cartography has resulted in “dozens of signs and monuments marking the center of Europe” (35). As noted by Jacques Rupnik, a Czech-born political scientist who resides in France: “Tell me where Central Europe is, and I can tell you who you are” (Johnson 6). Even this claim on Central Europe is losing its relevance; as Labov argues, the designation “carries little of the charge that it did in the 1980s and early 1990s, and Central Europe as a political and intellectual project has receded from the horizon” (4). If Central Europe is no longer the dominant framework for understanding cultural politics in the region, then the process of Europeanization and accession to the EU has supplanted it: “one cannot be more European than being a member of the EU” (Zombory 33).

Another approach involves adopting a temporal framework rather than a spatial one. All of these countries experienced some form of revolution following 1989, overturning dictatorial regimes and aspiring to a form of liberal democracy. But problems immediately beset these fledgling societies entering this transitional phase as they struggled to deal with the legacy of the Holocaust, past crimes committed under communism, and a failure to grant restitution or obtain reconciliation between opposing sides (Porter 133). Worse still, as former Polish dissident Adam Michnik explains, a virulent form of nationalism has filled this post-communist void:

Fortunately, communism is now extinct. But it has left behind nationalism, a nationalism practiced by people who derive a kind of beastly pleasure from renouncing their humanity. It lives on in the form of nostalgia, a phobia, an anti-democratic, anti-liberal, anti-European and anti-American ideology. You meet people who think like this among the political elites of all post-communist countries—from Bucharest and Moscow to Berlin, from Warsaw to Prague, from Zagreb to Belgrade. Nationalism in the post-communist era can take a variety of forms: that of the nostalgic communist Milošević, the post-Soviet dictator Putin, or the post-Soviet anti-Communists Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński. Their common denominator is invariably a resentment of the liberal rule of law, of the philosophy of dialogue, of the spirit of pluralism and tolerance.<sup>5</sup>

Well into the first decade of post-communism, historian Lonnie Johnson identified three processes determining the position of the “new” Europe: the violent collapse

of Yugoslavia; the dissolution of the USSR, and the economic/political integration with the EU. Because Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia joined the European Union in 2004, expanding again with the addition of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, they are “new” at least in that sense, although this institution has had its share of growing pains due to economic restructuring (Greece) and dissenters (the UK, at least at the time of this writing).<sup>6</sup>

By “new,” we are as well in large measure referring to the new generation of writers, artists, and cartoonists born in the 1970s or later, who have some memory of life under communism but only became adults after its fall. They grew up in households where their parents’ generation lived a substantial portion of their adult lives under communism, while their grandparents remember WWII. This new generation is looking both forward, as it is inspired and informed by traditions from Franco-Belgian and American comics, and back, as they use the medium of comics to re-examine and reevaluate not only their national past and respective comics traditions but also their own post-1989 identities and experiences.

## Comics Culture

Comics in the countries of the new Europe share some commonalities: many trace their origins to medieval icons or other religious art, which often included narrative elements; the influence of Western imports such as broad sheets and journals; and the rise of literacy, which by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had made local presses economically viable on a large scale. In Hungary, for example, the famous novelist Mór Jókai (aka Maurus Jokai) discovered Wilhelm Busch’s work in the *Fliegende Blätter* weekly, leading him in 1858 to include comics in his own journal, *Űstökös* [The Comet]. We should also note the circulation of artists between the different countries as well as immigrants returned from the West; Czech cartoonist Ladislav Vlodek, for example, returned to his native land after having moved to the USA as a child. Much of this early material modeled itself on French and German formulae (with humor and satire the predominant genres) and style (chiefly sequential pictures accompanied by text, sometimes rhymed).

With the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tastes increasingly reflected the rise of US-style kid-friendly humor, with some countries’ periodicals either reprinting the strips of Felix the Cat and other famous characters—not always legally—or else coming up with their own adventures for them. The popularity of animated cartoons further fueled demand, up to and after World War I. Once more, the circulation of artists between countries meant the development of the art form in unpredictable ways. In the aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, several Russian artists including Yuriy Lobachev resettled in what was then called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, forming the 1930s Belgrade Circle, which had an enormous impact on the development of comics in the former Yugoslavia (Antanasijević, Alaniz 2010).

Totalitarian states tended to repress comics; this was often the case in those territories seized by the Nazis. The USSR did also ban or limit comics as “bourgeois” Western pseudo-art, though it is a vast distortion to argue that it did so monolithically and consistently; the decades of Soviet rule saw many political ebbs and flows in which comics could find a niche, chiefly in children’s journals (e.g., *Chizh* [Siskin] and *Ezh* [Hedgehog] in the 1930s, Ivan Semenov’s *Veselié Kartinki* [Merry Pictures], launched in Thaw-era 1956) and satirical journals such as *Krokodil* [Crocodile], which launched in 1922 and outlived the Soviet regime. In short, to search for a US-style comics culture, anchored by newspaper strips and comic book “floppies,” in the Soviet Union is to miss the unique manifestations of the form. In this context, pictorial narrative proliferated in many different media: poster art, applied art, installations, children’s books, Gulag memoirs, painting, even propaganda. In any case, even after their subsumption into the Soviet bloc in the wake of World War II, the countries of Central/Eastern Europe almost uniformly enjoyed greater freedom to publish comics than did the USSR. For example, even after Hungary’s 1956 suppressed revolution, the communist party allowed for comics adaptations of classic literature modeled to an extent on *Classics Illustrated*.

Comics from the West made it past borders of varying porousness; this was especially so in Yugoslavia, which did not belong to the Soviet bloc. Another fount of comics, those made or approved by the communist parties of Western or bloc countries (France’s *Vaillant/Pif Gadget*), enjoyed widespread distribution in the region. The mid-1980s liberal reforms spearheaded by Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR led to even more relaxation of controls in the Soviet bloc countries. Poland plays a special role in this story, with the launch of its first, largest and most important comics festival in Łódź in 1989. On the basis of such events and the competitions they spawned, the doors opened ever wider for a normalization of comics cultures along a quasi-Western model. That same year the Soviet bloc fell, and those doors vanished entirely.

The initial euphoria in most of these countries over the switch to free-market democracy had to contend with the reality principle of hyper-inflation and economic tumult through the 1990s. For formerly state-subsidized artists and publishers, the new conditions meant struggle and for many, bankruptcy by mid-decade. For example, the first Latvian comics journal, *Klips*, launched 1992, lasted only four issues. Transnational publishers, such as the Danish firm Egmont, seized market share with their global brands when Mickey Mouse, Tintin and Marvel/DC superheroes proved impossible to compete with. Independent publications, while not unknown, proved the exception to the brutal economic rule. Chief among these is *Stripburger*, a crucial Slovenian anthology launched in 1992 that published many artists from the region and beyond.

So the situation essentially remained, until two events took place: the stabilization of the economy (which took longer in some countries) and the rise of the internet. The launch of sites such as Russia’s *Komiksolet* (1999) and Hungary’s *Kepegeny.net* in the early 2000s offered a new accessible venue for the

exhibition, discussion and commercialization of comic art. These online forums—including social networking sites such as Live Journal—proliferated, unifying comics communities as never before. For the first time, the entire world's comics output (albeit in illegal scanlations in some cases) could be easily enjoyed by Eastern/Central Europeans, while the exchange of their own works could proceed unhindered. To greater and lesser degrees, these countries' industries have risen since then, making inroads into the mainstream publishing market. Comics shops, while nowhere large in number, appeared. In some cases—Slovenia, Latvia, the Czech Republic—governments have lavishly supported the development, production, even study of their national comics traditions.<sup>7</sup> Particularly since 2000, comics scenes in Russia, Poland, Serbia, and the Czech Republic have gained momentum from new publications, international exchanges and comics festivals, among them Novo Doba, Komiksfest (later Frame), KomMissia, Boomfest, Comic Con Kyiv, Ligatura, and the International Comics Festival (in Budapest, Hungary). The present study's closer views of various countries from the region will supplement, complicate, and extend this general picture of comics in Central/Eastern Europe.

## The Transnational Turn

Drawing on social anthropology, postcolonialism and literary criticism, traceable to Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, and emerging over the last decade primarily from Manga Studies (Stein et al. 6), scholarly attention to the transnational features of graphic narrative highlights the “mutual literary influence between different countries and cultures, an exchange of ideas and strategies of representation that, at the same time, illustrates and fosters complex processes of cultural and economic transfer and interaction” (Schmitz-Evans 388). Treating comics as *ipso facto* “culturally hybrid phenomena” (ibid), the transnational turn accentuates multidirectionality, cross-border influence and global flows which—while not necessarily superseding single-country approaches<sup>8</sup>—serve as the basis for comparative analyses. As Stein et al. argue, “We can only grasp the full potential of graphic narrative once we venture beyond narrow notions of national comics traditions and recognize the essential interconnectedness and many interdependencies in the wealth of work produced and received across the globe” (4).

Despite its many crucial insights, however, this subfield's one major study to date falls short of accomplishing the task we feel needs doing, precisely because it mostly restricts itself to the output of a single country. *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads* (2013), despite sustained focus on transnational flows, centers its analysis on US comics—altogether fitting, given that the contributors have backgrounds in American Studies. As comparatists, we want to move the center, so to speak, with a sampling of European graphic narratives

chosen by scholars in the region, along with a few North American academics, to see what influences and trends developed from those directions. Similar to *Transnational Perspectives*, however, we do not want to be limited by placing these works solely in their national contexts, and devote particular attention to transnational influences and cross-disciplinary connections. To address these forces—both internal and external to the above-mentioned countries—short introductions to each section provide a useful précis of the national context of comics production, while individual chapters focus on close readings and analyses of selected works. In this way, *Comics of the New Europe* hopes to achieve not only breadth but depth in examinations of individual works.

What the reader will not find in this book: a definitive historical survey, a comprehensive overview or even a representative sample of all comics production in the “new” Europe before and after the fall of communism. We acknowledge that this project has some shortcomings from the start. We would like to have included more chapters on Poland, given the substantial comics culture there, and it would have been beneficial to include a section on the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which also joined the EU in 2004. As is sometimes the case with books of this type, the idea was sparked by a conversation at MLA in early 2017, followed by an academic panel—in this instance, at the American Comparative Literature Association conference that summer, held in Utrecht, Holland—thus attracting more European participants than it might ordinarily have. Nonetheless, there are understandably gaps in our overview, and we consider this book an open invitation for further research. The essay writers themselves—several of whom, as noted, live and work in the region—had relative freedom to write about comics of their own choosing based on subject matter, artistic style, uniqueness and/or to highlight some salient aspect of the comics scene or culture in which they appeared. Some of our contributors adopt a primarily historical approach, others place more emphasis on the formal qualities and styles in the works as such. Quite often, these examples resonate with more widely-known productions of the global graphic narrative canon.

Given the tremendous historical upheaval that these countries have experienced, a number of these chapters engage with the difficulties of representing non-fiction narratives, the traumas of WWII, and the subsequent socialist regimes. Others focus less explicitly on the national, instead turning to a playful avant-garde aesthetic (Sekulić’s chapter), or a more internal, psychological journey (Foret’s chapter). Each contribution centers on close readings of significant works or influential cartoonists from the region.

If the reader prefers to approach this book from the perspective of the particular comics culture of each region, we provide brief overviews for each of the sections (Unit 1: Serbia and Croatia; Unit 2: The Czech Republic and Slovakia; Unit 3: the DDR and German comics post-unification; Unit 4: Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Ukraine) before delving into chapters that address specific works, and describe the alternative comics scene as well as the role of regional comics festivals in

disseminating texts and promoting exchanges among cartoonists. If, on the other hand, the reader's curiosity is driven more by thematic and theoretical concerns, the section that follows develops connections among individual chapters concerning transnationalism, translation, authenticity, historical trauma, and nostalgia.

## Translation and Transnationalism

Post-1989, the comics scenes across the former communist countries dramatically expanded, and while some copies of western comics had circulated clandestinely, now they appeared for the first time in new translations. Thanks to independent comics publishers devoted to alternative comics, there is a Romanian translation of French-Iranian Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (Art Publishers, 2010), a Polish version of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (*timof i cisi wspólnicy* [timof and quiet partners] 2009), while *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* [Epileptic] by David B. was published in Czech (*Padoucnice*, Mot, 2001). Art Spiegelman's two-volume biography *Maus* (1991), which recounts his father Vladek's story of surviving Auschwitz, was influential throughout Europe, although the dates of translation, their quality, and reception vary widely across individual countries (Baccolini and Zanettin 116).

In the Czech Republic, *Maus* was released by an established literary publisher, Torst, in 1997 and 1998, which immediately distinguished it from mass-market comics. For Czech artist Jaromír 99, *Maus* set a new standard for comics as an art form directed at adult audiences. He credits Spiegelman's collaborative autobiography with inspiring him to produce two graphic novels—*Alois Nebel* (as the illustrator) and *Bomber* (as the writer and illustrator)—that deal with historical traumas in Czech history (Kuhlman 114). Spiegelman was especially concerned with the Hebrew, German, French, and Polish translations of his work because these languages play a crucial role in his father's history (Spiegelman 152). Of these, the German and Polish (2001) translations proved the most controversial—the German edition for its inclusion of a swastika on the cover (normally prohibited in Germany), and the Polish edition for its depiction of Poles as pigs (Spiegelman 159). While *Maus* was published in the Czech Republic, Germany, and France just a few years after its original appearance in the US, in other countries the lag was somewhat longer; in Hungary, the complete *Maus* was released in 2004 by Ulpius-ház, and in Romania not until 2012 by Art Publishers (Szép, Precup). Moscow's Corpus Press published a Russian translation in 2013.

As a result of a proliferation of translations, cross-border exchange among publishing houses, international comics festivals, and the internet, cartoonists post-1989 are aware of and seek out a range of influences above and beyond their national contexts. Contributor Eszter Szép writes about Hungarian cartoonist Dániel Csordás, who first published autobiographical comics on his blog in 2009, and cites David B (French), Aleksandar Zograf (Serbian), Dino Buzzati (Italian), Jack Kirby and



Fig. 1. Lucie Lomová (Czech Republic) chronicles her life in online comics diaries such as *Deník z Angoulême* [Diary from Angouleme]. Pictured: August 30, 2018.



Frank Miller (US), and Hungarian painter Ferenc Lantos as inspirations. Ewa Stańczyk's chapter discusses how Polish scriptwriter Wanda Hagedorn and artist Jacek Fraś's *Totalnie nie nostalgia. Memuar* [Totally Not Nostalgia. A Memoir] (2017) deliberately turns away from Polish tradition, aligning instead with the global trend in feminist graphic memoir, particularly Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Martin Foret analyzes the *Oskar Ed* graphic novels of Branko Jelinek, a Slovak cartoonist who resides in Prague, and identifies the melancholy irony of Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000) and Dan Clowes' *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (1993) as akin to his own work.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the graphic narratives discussed in this volume reflect a transnational sensibility to their core.

Two contemporary comics artists from the region, of different generations, signal the emergence of the decidedly turn-of-the-21<sup>st</sup>-century transnational ethos our study charts. Both publish in their native language as well as English; address universal themes while situating their work in their respective cultures; publish their comics abroad as much as at home in anthologies and translations; and make deft use of the internet to reach a global audience. Furthermore, both these independent cartoonists turn to autobiography, what Bart Beaty calls "the genre that most distinctly defines the small-press comics production of Europe in its current revitalization" (140-141) as an authorizing mode to explore the self and its place in cross-border flows.

The Czech artist Lucie Lomová (born 1964), well-known for her series *Anča a Pepík* [Annie and Joseph] in the children's journal *Čtyřlístek* [Four-Leaf Clover], published her first graphic novel *Anna chce skočit* [Anna Wants to Jump] in France in 2006, through Thierry Groensteen's Editions de l'an 2 (this was in fact the first Czech graphic novel to receive its initial publication abroad; a Czech edition appeared in 2007). Her work has appeared in French, Polish and German.<sup>10</sup> Since about 2015 Lomová has kept a comics diary, portions of which appear online, as during her 2018 artist residency at Angoulême's Maison des Auteurs.<sup>11</sup> Banal, funny, profound, Lomová's catalogue of her daily activities (meals, chores, family get-togethers, deadline struggles, walks) reflect a strikingly 21<sup>st</sup>-century sense of disorientation, bemusement, anomie, joyousness and fascinated unease that comes with a doggedly examined life (Fig. 1). As she told an interviewer:

[For my diary] I can even find drama when I stay in my flat. Like when little insects invaded my flower. What to do about that? Then I switch on the TV, and there are terrorist attacks, and this contrasts with my dramas about insects and flowers. They contrast with really big tragedies. It's frightening. But what can I do about it? Send money somewhere? It shows that, even if you're aware of those horrible things which are happening all over the world, the sense of helplessness and having empty hands, you can't do anything about it (Lomová interview).

A younger cartoonist from Poland, Anna Krzton (born 1988), received her MA from the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice in 2013. Based in Warsaw, she frequently participates in



Fig. 2. In her self-published *Summer Sketches* (2018), Anna Krzton (Poland) humorously reflects on her travels through Western Europe.

comics festivals, self-publishes, and contributes to small press anthologies. Her graphic novel on depression, *Weź się w garść* [Get a Grip] appeared in 2018 from Wydawnictwo Komiksowe. In her self-published *Summer Sketches* (2018), Krzton humorously reflects on her and her partner's wanderings through Europe, reflecting on the Brexit vote ("Maybe they won't kick us out right away..."), rude German museum staff, and her disappointment in finally tasting the Japanese confection daifuku ("not as good as I expected"). These and other comics, in which she extols the liminal life in hotels and "quirky" cross-border encounters, celebrate a millennial devotion to unimpeded international travel as a given of 21<sup>st</sup>-century life (which the older Lomová, with her longer perspective, did not grow up taking entirely for granted) (Fig.2). As Krzton notes through considerable understatement: "[I] never lived in times of communism in Poland. But from what I hear and understand, listening to the stories of older generations, it would probably be quite hard to do then, what I do now" (Krzton e-mail correspondence).

## Authenticity

As is the case with Anglo-American alternative graphic narrative, the comics of the new Europe often invoke a form of what Charles Hatfield calls "ironic authentication," or "the implicit reinforcement of truth claims through their explicit rejection" (125), to counter dominant ideological narratives, gesturing both towards the nationalistic discourses of the present and the propagandistic media of the past. "Ironic authentication" links the personal with the political, as Hatfield explains by highlighting connections between Harvey Pekar's personal, autobiographical comics and the comics journalism of Joe Sacco: "in the best of [autobiographical/journalistic] comics, autobiographical self-reflexivity serves to pry open larger political and cultural issues" (130). Max Bledstein's chapter on Aleksandar Zograf, the Serbian author of a cartoon diary of the war in Yugoslavia and the 1999 NATO bombing, refers to "ironic authentication" when describing Zograf's numerous tortured, self-reflexive moments as he struggles to make sense of himself and his place in war-torn Serbia. In another example from the same region, Aleksandra Sekulić interprets Serbian cartoonist Wostok's cultivation of a deliberately amateur style and collaborative process as a form of open defiance against these same ideologies of Western superiority and Serbian chauvinism, as well as referencing avant-garde traditions going back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Depicting the drawing hand of the cartoonist is another self-reflexive strategy that connotes authenticity, a trope Zograf intersperses in his narrative. This gesture places an emphasis on the process of drawing as a subjective rendering, such that the line on the page is a palpable trace, not an objective record of a fixed reality; in fact, part of its charm can reside in its unapologetic amateurism and accessibility that blurs the line between the artist and ordinary individuals. Mihaela Precup's chapter, which discusses Brynjar Ábel Bandlien's *Strímb Living* and Andreea Chirică's

*The Year of the Pioneer* in the context of post-communist Romania, emphasizes how these cartoonists' drawing styles complement the quotidian subject matter of their autobiographical works. This is particularly relevant to Chirică's diary of living under communism, since the author uses a style of national penmanship specific to Romania at the time, thus "connect[ing] the author to an entire generation of children who grew up during the last decade of Ceaușescu's dictatorship" (Precup).

At the other end of the spectrum, consider the autobiographical comics of Hungarian artist Csordás, who uses a stylus and tablet—digital drawing—to create his web comics. In one work, he provides instructions on how to draw his avatar, "Dániel," using step-by-step transformations in photoshop in each successive panel. This method converts the trace of his hand through a process of "variation, layering, and repetition," and calls for a new "conception of the line in autobiographical genres in a digital context" (Szép). Whether the lines are rendered in graphite, ink, or pixels, however, all of these artists share a common interest in laying claim to authenticity by exposing and playing with the constructed nature of the form. As Jared Gardner writes:

The comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal properties to its limitations as juridical evidence—to the compressions and gaps of its narrative (represented graphically by the gutterspace between the panels) and to the iconic distillations of its art (6).

Gardner's observations also take us a step further by considering not only the line but also "compressions and distillations" that govern the rhythm of the comic from panel to panel, and from page to page. In this respect, the discontinuities, ruptures, and absences in graphic narrative are also crucial when considering historical representations. In the section that follows, we discuss works that depart from the autobiographical mode and more overtly tackle broader questions of history, witness, and ethics.

## History and Counter-History

Graphic narrative holds distinct aesthetic advantages for depicting fraught ideological terrain, clashing identities, and contested histories.<sup>12</sup> Hillary Chute, for example, notes, "We see that as historical enunciation weaves jaggedly through paradoxical spaces and shifting temporalities, comics—as a form that relies on space to represent time—becomes structurally equipped to challenge dominant modes of storytelling and history writing" (456). Thus, as many of the graphic narratives discussed in this anthology amply demonstrate, the discontinuities and ruptures in comics form can function as markers of historiography, revealing the fraught process of representing history.

Biz Nijdam's chapter on Susanne Buddenberg and Thomas Henseler's non-fiction comic *Berlin–Geteilte Stadt* [Berlin–Divided City] tackles this very problem as she examines the role of the archive in representing East German history, and “demonstrate[es] how its deployment gestures towards the veracity of the comics' historical presentation while undermining the idea of authentic representations of history altogether.” Nijdam also addresses the complex status of photographs in graphic narrative, since they can appear to function as “proof”—even though they demand careful reading in context given shifts in time, memory, and historical perspective. In her chapter on Czech artist Vojtěch Mašek's adaptation of historian Pavel Kosatík's script *1952: Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského* [1952: How Gottwald Murdered Slánský], (2014), Martha Kuhlman discusses the representation of one of the darker moments of Czech history: the Stalinist show trials of the 1950s. Mašek intersperses surrealistic elements and ruptures among more realistic details, confounding levels of reality to provoke and unsettle the reader.

A graphic narrative's challenge to the dominant historical discourse can also manifest on a more symbolic level that only a close reading of cultural context can bring to light. This is the case with José Alaniz's reading of Ukrainian comics artist Igor Baranko's dystopian graphic novels *Shamanism* (2006) and *Jihad* (2012), which posit counter-histories that critique Russia's imperial ambitions on Ukraine.

## Nostalgia and Ostalgia

With the fall of communism and the end of censorship and state control, scholars have unprecedented access to files, archives, and popular culture produced under communism. In some instances, this has led to a form of commodified nostalgia, commonly termed “Ostalgia,” that revels in products and remnants of another era, glossing over the more problematic aspects of living under these dictatorships. But this post-communist moment also provides an opportunity to reexamine these artifacts in a new context from a more critical perspective. Were comics simply tools of propaganda, or could they potentially introduce subversive elements into an ostensibly innocent medium intended for children? Sean Eedy and Michael Scholz analyze two of the most popular East German comics publications for children: *Mosaik* von Hannes Hagen and *Atze*, both of which began publication in 1955 (while the latter was discontinued in 1991, the former remains in print, though at a vastly reduced print run). Eedy argues that the comics in *Mosaik*, specifically the adventures of the Digidags, were more ideologically ambiguous than the authorities intended, while Scholz demonstrates how the hard-line spy plots in *Atze* reflected contemporaneous geopolitical tensions between the GDR and the West.

In her discussion of nostalgia in the context of post-communist states, critic Svetlana Boym claims that “[n]ostalgia became a defense mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and the economic shock therapy” (64). According to

Boym, this defensive nostalgia could assume two forms: restorative or reflective. As she explains, “Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory” (49). Dragana Obradović exposes a virulent form of “restorative” nostalgia in Nina Bunjevac’s graphic memoir *Fatherland* (2014). Narrated from her perspective, Bunjevac observes the extreme nationalism of her Serbian father with a combination of distance and empathy, although ultimately his world is closed off from hers. In his discussion of Pavel Čech’s picture book *Velká knižní záhada* [The Great Book Mystery] (2014). Pavel Kořínek shows how the author evokes a whole world of childhood books read under the Czech “normalization” of the 1970s and 1980s. In this sense, Čech’s art undertakes an act of reflective nostalgia—one bound up in individual and collective memories of popular culture in communist Czechoslovakia, and thus constitutes a form of “countermemory,” and a place of “‘inner freedom’ independent from state policy” (Boym 62).

In closing, we once again express our hope that this volume will spur more research on comics from the “new” Europe—countries, however defined, that have been thus far neglected in comics studies. A few publishing houses—Fantagraphics (Seattle, US), Europe Comics (Belgium), Self-Made Hero (UK)—release English translations of comics by authors from Poland, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Ukraine, but these are a rarity. Centrala, originally based in Poland (2007) but operating in London since 2014, goes the furthest in bridging the gap between European comics translated into English and Anglophone comics by publishing the works of Aleksandar Zograf, Lucie Lomová, and Anke Feutchenberger alongside works by Chester Brown and Tom Gauld. To return to the example of *Hicksville* by Horrocks, recall that in Kupe’s library, all comics exist together in a transnational and transhistorical utopian space. As comics scholars, we can only hope to strive towards this ideal.

## Notes

- 1 The term “Other Europe” was popularized in the West by the “Writers from the Other Europe” series published by Penguin Books and edited by Philip Roth, which ran from 1975 to 1989. Initially focusing on authors from Czechoslovakia such as Ivan Klíma and Milan Kundera, who were personal friends of Roth’s, the series expanded to include authors from Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. According to Roth, the purpose of the series was “to bring together outstanding and influential works of fiction by Eastern European writers,” most of whom were “virtually unknown in America” (Goodman 718, 727).
- 2 In both the *Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel* (2017) and the *Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (2018), the chapters on the international graphic novel and world literature do not mention any comics creators from East European countries.

- 3 *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to the Present* (Thames and Hudson, 2014) by Dan Mazur and Alexander Danner includes a chapter on European comics of the 1990s, but only briefly mentions a few German and Swiss creators, such as Anke Feuchtenberger and Thomas Ott. Bart Beaty's *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (University of Toronto Press, 2007) concentrates on the avant-garde within the Franco-Belgian tradition.
- 4 For instance, Monika Schmitz-Emans praises Gene Kannenberg's *500 Essential Graphic Novels*, but notes that his survey is limited since the majority of titles represented are "US productions in English" (390), and neglects award-winning authors from other countries.
- 5 For a detailed account of the rightist turn in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Poland, see Appelbaum. We should stress that such popular hyper-nationalist sentiments have also taken root outside "new" Europe, and even beyond Europe itself. Witness French President Emmanuel Macron's remarks during the Paris observances for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War I, on November 11, 2018—widely read as a public rebuke of the US president (an avowed nationalist), before whom they were delivered: "Patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism: Nationalism is a betrayal of patriotism. In saying 'our interests first, whatever happens to the others,' you erase the most precious thing a nation can have, that which makes it live, that which causes it to be great and that which is most important: its moral values" (Associated Press). In the run-up to the 2019 G20 Summit in Osaka Japan, Russian President Putin went so far as to declare that liberal democracy had "outlived its purpose" (CNBC).
- 6 And by "new" Europe, we certainly don't mean to endorse former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's (2001-2006 under president George Bush) infamous remark that the "new" Europe supported the Gulf war.
- 7 See for example the Czech government-supported *Ještě jsme ve válce* [We are Still at War] project. An English translation was released by the University of Chicago Press in 2017.
- 8 Denson et al. note in this regard that "the multidirectional transactions uncovered by a transnational perspective problematize the foundational role of discrete national units; though not effaced, the particular is thus rendered internally multiple as the traces of exchange are discovered *within*, and not merely *between*, national cultures, traditions and identities" (3).
- 9 See the interview with Branko Jelinek in *Aargh!* No. 13 (2014) and Jelinek's profile on the website Komiks.cz (<http://komiks.cz/clanek.php?id=511>).
- 10 For more on Lomová, see Alaniz 2013.
- 11 An artists residency program, part of the Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image in Angoulême, France.
- 12 In the introduction to their edited volume *Redrawing the Historical Past: History, Memory, and Multiethnic Graphic Novels*, Martha J. Cutter and Cathy

Schlund-Vials argue that multiethnic graphic novels serve a similar purpose in debunking or challenging dominant historical narratives in an American context.

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The Serbian satirical magazines *Zmaj* [Dragon, 1864-1871], *Jazavac* [Badger, 1872] and most importantly *Neven* [Marigold, 1880] figure among the earliest appearances of comics-like material combining word, image and sequential narrative in the South-eastern Slavic lands under the Austro-Hungarian empire. Comics' popularity grew in the post-1918 Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, with translated US material especially prominent.

The first serialized work appeared in 1925 in *Kopriva* [Nettle]: Sergije Mironović Golovčenko's adventures of Maks and Maksić, two mischievous boys. Children's illustrated journals proliferated, with *Veseli Četvrtak* [Happy Thursday, 1932-1935] the first to bring Disney characters to market. But one event above all proved catalytic for the country's widespread acceptance of comic strips: the 1934 publication of Alex Raymond and Dashiell Hammet's *Detektiv X-9* (original English title *Secret Agent X-9*) in the Belgrade journal *Politika*, which launched many competitors, imitators, and a public zeal for genre material. This demand was met by, among others, *Oko* [Eye] (1935), the nation's first comics magazine (co-founded by Andrija Maurović, the acknowledged "father of Croatian and Yugoslav comics"), *Strip* (1935) and *Politikin Zabavnik* [Politika's Entertainment] (1939).

Another major, long-lasting development in comics was the emergence of the "Belgrade Circle" (made up in part by White Russian émigrés after the 1917 revolution), which introduced a new level of artistry and sophistication into comics. In the years before World War II, artists such as Đorđe (Yurii) Lobačev; Nikolai Tishchenko; Nikolai Navojev; Konstantin Kuznetsov; Sergei Solovyov and Ivan Šenšin revolutionized the scene, owing a particular stylistic debt to US artists Raymond, Hal Foster, Burne Hogarth, and other adventure strip artists, as well as to Italian and Franco-Belgian influences. In Zagreb, Croatia, Maurović and another important figure, cartoonist/ animator Walter Neugebauer, published *Miha Miš* [Mickey Mouse, 1935-1941] and *Mikijevo Carstvo* [Mickey's Empire, 1935-1941]. In all, the Yugoslav industry produced over 15,000 pages of comics between the mid-1930s and the invasion of the country during World War II.

Following the war, now as the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia under communist rule, the country fitfully revived its comics industry. Though at first subject to increased censorship due to their perceived associations with the capitalist West, comics experienced a new acceptance during the Informbiro Period (1948-1955), when a split in relations between Yugoslavia, the Eastern bloc countries and the Soviet Union (and in particular the severing of Tito's ties with Stalin) led to greater openness towards Western popular culture. The renewed publication in Belgrade of *Politikin Zabavnik* in 1952 exemplified the change. Reflecting the new geopolitical realities, Yugoslav comics saw a renewed "Golden Age" from the 1960s to the 1980s. Highlights of this era include the launch of the journal *Stripoteka* (1969); the enormous popularity of the Italian satirical spy series *Alan Ford* by Max Bunker and

Magnus (translation 1972); and the debut of *Dikan* by Ninoslav Šibalić and Lazar Sredanović (1969), a humorous adventure series originally set among the ancient Slavs of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

With the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the Serbian mainstream comics market largely collapsed, while alternative comics began to flourish, as exemplified by artists such as Wostok (Danilo Milošev) and Grabowski, overlapping with the music and art scenes, and other elements of the counterculture. Aleksandra Sekulić's chapter examines how Wostok, inspired by the Soviet avant-gardes' literature of absurd, used similar techniques to satirize the dominant political discourse of Serbian national mythomania, as well as the colonial gaze upon the "uncivilized" Balkans. Given how inexpensive and easy it was to produce DIY comics, the medium proved well-suited to distribute under the radar of the state. Aleksandar Zograf (Sasha Rakezić), with work published in *Zero* and *Weirdo* and books such as *Regards from Serbia* (2007), became the most well-known and widely-translated cartoonist from the Balkans, and arguably all of Central/Eastern Europe, in the 1990s/early 2000s. In his chapter, Max Bledstein continues with the theme of the absurd by analyzing Zograf's use of highly subjective and surreal imagery in autobiographical depictions of his traumatic experiences in war-torn Serbia, and the NATO bombings in particular. And in the third and final chapter of this section, Dragana Obradović shifts our attention to trauma in another form through the predicament of Serbian exiles in the work of Serbian-Canadian artist Nina Bunjevac (*Fatherland*, 2014).

Other influential artists from the region include the graphic novelist Enki Bilal (Bosnian/French) and Bosnian Mirko Ilić (*Heavy Metal, Epic*); the Croatians Igor Kordey (Dark Horse, Marvel), Danijel Žeželj (Marvel, DC), Darko Macan, Dunja Janković, Igor Hofbauer and Ivana Pipal; and the Slovene Tomaž Lavrič (*Red Alert: Dark Days*, 1996), who emerged from the "Mladina circle," centered on the weekly *Mladina* [Youth] in the mid-1980s. Major arts/comics collectives such as the Kosmoplovci in Belgrade (a collective including Radovan Popović, Aleksandar Opačić, Lazar Bodroža, and Danijel Savović, among others ) and Komikaze in Zagreb (founded in 2002 by Ivana Armanini, Janković and Hofbauer, and others ), along with arts festivals such as *GRRR!* (founded by Zograf in Pancevo, 2002) *Novo Doba* [New Era], *Crtani roman šou* [Comic Strip Show] in Croatia, and the seminal journal *Stripburger* in Slovenia (founded 1992) make the former Yugoslav comics scene among the most vibrant in Europe.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the scene has taken great strides onto the internet, with platforms such as Kosmoplovci, Komikaze, and Modesty Comics (founded in 2013 by Zika and Tijana Tamburić) showcasing hundreds of classic and contemporary works and artists. As Armanini notes:

[On the internet, f]ree comics travel freely in all directions, they are accessible to anyone at any time, they are interactive; at the same time, they attract new

authors from all over the world, so the network of interesting people is constantly expanding and intensifying. Paper editions are a fetish, a thing of the past, an *homage* to all the paper that we have flipped through from our childhood to the present day. When fresh, it smells good, but it also gathers dust on the shelves. If I could bet on the future, I would place all the money on the digital, its virtual ease and fluidity. It is publishing greed alone that hinders the progress and bright future of comics.

Academic attention has also intensified, with major publications such as *The Comics We Loved: Selection Of 20th Century Comics & Creators From The Region Of Former Yugoslavia* (2011), a landmark lexicon co-authored by the late Yugoslav comics historian Zupan Zdravko and a team of specialists, and *The Invisible Comics: Alternative Comics in Serbia 1980-2010*, edited by Aleksandra Sekulić, Radovan Popović, and Lazar Bodroža, an anthology of comics published in Serbian, English, and German.

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# Max Bledstein

## **Un-Drawn Experience: Visualizing Trauma in Aleksandar Zograf's *Regards from Serbia***

The autobiographical comics of Aleksandar Zograf, collected in the anthology *Regards from Serbia* (2007), depict life in Serbia from the beginning of the Croatian War of Independence to the aftermath of the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Zograf represents his experiences in part through surrealist images, metatextual references to other works of cartooning, and depictions of characters' views of the world around them.<sup>1</sup> These methods of illustration reflect the trauma of Zograf's past: just as Cathy Caruth argues in her landmark book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that questions regarding trauma "can never be asked in a straightforward way but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary," the levels of mediation in Zograf's comics reflect the challenges posed by more straightforward depictions of traumatic experience (5). Although Zograf's representation of wartime Serbia is, in fact, quite the opposite of being un-drawn, he couches his memoirs in illustrative layers facilitating the artistic rendering of the horrors of Serbian life in the nineties.

Picking up from Caruth, theorists of trauma and literature such as Eugene L. Arva and Michael Rothberg argue that ignoring the standards of realism can help authors and artists to depict their traumatic experiences. Cartoonists' praxis of such depiction can be understood using the work of comics scholars such as Charles Hatfield and Hillary Chute, who describe the particular capacity of comics as a medium for self-representation and the depiction of trauma, respectively. *Regards from Serbia* exemplifies their arguments and those of Arva and Rothberg through the evocative portrait of wartime Serbia captured in its transcendence of realist norms.<sup>2</sup>



I argue that Zograf's depictions of characters' subjective visualizations of Serbian life, the role of art in mediating everyday experiences, and surrealistic imagery in *Regards from Serbia* convey the power of depicting trauma in the mixed media form of comics.

## Perspective Drawn

Zograf's comics draw on his personal experiences and influences of the art and culture of the former Yugoslavia. He began drawing comics in childhood, and later attended art school (Spurgeon). Chris Ware was a major artistic influence for Zograf, although his often frenzied visuals differ stylistically from Ware's precision (Vervaet 163). Zograf began publishing in the US in the early '90s, and his 1994 comic *Life Under Sanctions* (included in *Regards from Serbia*) was among the first works to present a Serbian perspective on war in the nineties Yugoslav Wars (Spurgeon). Since 2003, Zograf has published the weekly strip *Poloni svet* ("The Second-Hand World") in the Belgrade magazine *Vreme* (Morton 74). As a Serbian cartoonist, Zograf participates in a tradition dating back to at least January 1932, when the magazine *Veseli Četvrtak* [Joyful Thursday], which prominently featured comic strips, was first published (Zupan 90). Several years later, in March 1936, magazine *Mika Miš* began regularly showcasing the work of local artists (Zupan 93). The popularity of Serbian comics continued throughout the thirties, but was then hamstrung by the 1941 Nazi attack on Belgrade (Zupan 100).

Half a century later, Zograf carries on the Serbian comics tradition, but does so through a depiction of Serbian life during the nineties and shortly thereafter. Between 1987 and 1997, as a result in large part of the reign of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, real average pay decreased by fifty percent, the rate of population increase fell from a rise of two per thousand to a decline of three per thousand, and murders doubled (Sell 359). Resolution 757, a measure passed by the UN Security Council in May 1992, banned trade and restricted international travel, which led to Serbia being "cut off from the rest of the world" (Norris 161). Government-controlled media during this period portrayed Serbia as the innocent victim of unjust international oppression (Gagnon 96), and the isolation imposed by the sanctions made it difficult for Serbians to access alternative sources of information (Gordy 193). James Gow and Milena Michalski describe this period as being one "in which optimism was almost absent" (156). Zograf's representation of trauma captures the absence.

One method of traumatic depiction can be seen in Zograf's representations of his and other characters' subjectivities. This is perhaps the most obvious way to introduce imagery not conforming to the demands of realism within a narrative set in a real-world milieu, as the images can be explained through the characters' perspectives. Stija Vervaet sees the question of how to represent such perspectives, whether through the visualization of subjectivity or otherwise, as a central issue of Zograf's work:

"The traumatic experience Zograf's avatar must work through is related not to the past but to the nightmarish present, yet the question remains how to render visible this experience" (168). Indeed, a primary way in which Zograf shows such working through is with the explicit explanation of surreal images as being imagery existing within characters' heads.

The most frequent depiction of Zograf's subjectivity occurs in the drawings of the dreams of his cartoon stand-in (whom I subsequently refer to as "Aleksandar"), which frequently concern animals or animal-like creatures. In an interview with Tom Spurgeon, Zograf describes his comics as depicting Serbia in the nineties as "reflected through the mind of a dreamy and half-witted person such as myself," and this reflection can be seen throughout the literal dreaminess of *Regards from Serbia*. The book's first panel contains a caption in which Zograf writes, "I wake up with the memory of a frog-like image I saw while in a half-dream state," accompanied by an image of a person's body with a frog's head on top (11). A later caption describes "a large and mean dog-like animal" being attacked by Zograf and his father with knives and forks, and the corresponding drawing, accordingly, shows a snarling creature with utensils sticking out of his body (66). Animals also appear in Zograf's dreams in a panel he identifies as showing "a vivid dream about a dinosaur," a caption Zograf pairs with an image of Aleksandar sleeping and a thought balloon showing his dream



Fig. 1. A man dreams of a beast from *Regards from Serbia*, Top Shelf, 2007, p. 54.

avatar watching the creature (240). The repetitiveness of these panels suggests a need to authenticate his oneiric visions: whereas more realistic imagery would perhaps be accepted by the reader more readily, the redundancy between the captions and drawings indicates a desire to emphasize the images' veracity. But even without the repetition, Zograf makes clear that he shows his experience of Serbia in part through drawings of his dreams.

Yet Zograf does not confine himself to depicting his own dreams; he also shows those of others. As an unnamed woman wakes her husband up to pick up bread, he dreams of a lizard-like creature with a smaller, similar creature in its mouth (24). In another panel, the caption likens war to a "huge monster," which Zograf illustrates with a man dreaming of the face of a similar fantastical beast (Fig. 1).

Mythical creatures once again factor into dreams, even as Zograf illustrates the visions of people other than himself. But unlike the close correlation between caption and image in Zograf's drawings of his own dreams, here the words and visuals have a looser relationship. The first dream's text contains no suggestion of the accompanying image, and the second dream's text references the monster but suggests it is merely metaphorical. Zograf thereby shows more trepidation in depicting the dreams of others, as the lack of repetition suggests less certainty about the images than he shows in the drawings of his own visions. Yet the use of oneiric imagery still shows Zograf turning to dreams to capture the difficulty of Serbian life.

Zograf's depiction of dreamlike images can likewise be seen in his drawings of waking visions. Next to a caption in which Zograf describes his "mind wandering into strangest dimensions," a thought balloon next to Aleksandar shows a man with long and flexible limbs enclosing two shaded, ominous figures and a man with a long tongue sticking out of his mouth (181). Zograf likewise describes his thoughts as "still wandering" in a later panel, in which the body of a grinning, dark creature appears to be attached to Aleksandar's head (233). Earlier on, Aleksandar states, "Visions have to be materialized," and an adjacent thought balloon depicts a mischievous-looking pig; a man's head with a bird on top poking his eyes out; and an image of three skinny, limbless figures (22). As with the dreams, the specific content of these waking visions does not matter as much as their overall absurdity: realism fails to capture the feelings Zograf attempts to depict here. Zograf's depictions of war through subjective imagery link his work with that of Jacques Callot and Francisco Goya, whom Hillary Chute describes as "foundational artist-reporters" (40). Chute notes the two painters' shared use of their art "ultimately to observe" scenes of atrocity (62). Like Callot and Goya, Zograf shows his particular perspective of the violence. He turns to surrealist imagery to express himself, transcending realist boundaries to show the pain of wartime experience.

The subjective imagery at times presents opportunities for escape from the harsh realities of life in Serbia. In one panel, Aleksandar appears to come up with a solution to his woes: "But I know what I'm going to do! I'm going to think positive! Yes! I'm

going to continue to think about my imaginary world!" (169) A thought balloon in the following panel shows him envisioning goblin-like creatures balancing on each other's heads, arms, and palms. "The reality in this country is so overwhelming...I need a break! I want to think about something different, about some other world," Aleksandar says in a comparable splash panel (251). This text accompanies an image containing a sun with a face, two winged creatures, and a shadowy figure holding two identical men on his palms. Both of these drawings, in conjunction with their text, show the fantastical visions as ways for Aleksandar to momentarily escape his wartime surroundings. Here, going beyond realism allows Zograf to show a way in which he deals with the horrors of trauma.

But the depictions of characters' subjectivities also capture their dark pessimism about their existences. Zograf describes a "famous painter who was prophesizing that the whole world will be destructed in just 15 minutes by some giant tectonic catastrophe [sic]" (48).<sup>3</sup> In the images that follow, Zograf shows people and vehicles falling into a chasm in the ground, with the caustic addendum that the Serbs' familiarity with suffering would allow them to survive. A similar panel's caption reads, "I was thinking about us all disappearing one day into a big hole in the ground," accompanied by a drawing of people plummeting without a clear endpoint (213). These illustrations of psychological visions show Zograf turning away from realistic depictions of traumatic experience to embrace even darker imaginings. This turning away reflects Paul Morton's argument that Zograf's comics, "trapped as they are by the author's own idiosyncrasies, and at the mercy of his artistic instincts, provide a substitution for the official archival system his country needs to reimagine itself" (75). Zograf's idiosyncratic rejection of objectivity provides him with a means to illustrate his pain without precisely rendering the world around him.

The pessimistic imagery works in tandem with the optimistic depictions of subjectivity to show the range of perspectives people can have on wartime life. Some images provide a much-needed escape from Serbian life, whereas others present even more terrifying, apocalyptic visions. Yet in all of the previously discussed drawings, Zograf captures the trauma of his past by showing the ways in which Aleksandar and others visualize an existence removed from Serbian reality. As *Regards from Serbia* shows, these visualizations can take the form of cheerful fantasy, violent nightmares, and the unclassifiably bizarre. In any case, they capture Zograf's illustration of his experience not within the confines of realism, but through the subjective images of him and his fellow Serbians. This focus on subjectivity connects Zograf's depictions of violence with Serbian films such as *Land of Truth, Love and Freedom* (2000) and *War Live* (2000), which Nevena Daković argues "generate for posterity a relevant image of the 'aggression' and of the collective nightmare, gaining supreme importance as a form of therapy for the tortured nation" (212). Zograf's imagery has a similarly therapeutic function in its idiosyncratic visualization of wartime violence.

## Panelling Pain

Theories of how comics can represent lived experience, and specifically experiences of trauma, help to elucidate the power of Zograf's work. Critics such as Hatfield and Chute, among others, argue that comics has a particular capacity to facilitate cartoonists' self-representation, particularly amidst historical strife. According to Hatfield, comics allow cartoonists to interrogate notions of truth and objectivity in the representation of their experience, which can be seen throughout Zograf's drawings of his and others' subjectivities. Hatfield uses the term "ironic authentication" to describe the authenticity of self-representation stemming from a clear disavowal of objectivity (125). Hatfield suggests that comics is a particularly adept medium for ironic authentication of self-representation, since "in the breakdowns of comics we see the self (in action over a span of time) represented by multiple selves" (126). Therein lies what Hatfield sees as the "potential for radical cultural argument" in the medium of comics (114). Such potential can be seen through both the multiplicity of Zograf's drawings and his rejection of objectivity, since the multiple Aleksandars throughout *Regards from Serbia* challenge the notion that Zograf can be captured through a singular avatar. Zograf's embrace of subjectivity demonstrates ironic authentication, as he attempts a genuine depiction of Serbian life by drawing from his own imagination rather than trying to show the horrors of wartime trauma more realistically.

In fact, the self-representative capacities of comics particularly facilitate representations of trauma, as Zograf's work exemplifies. Chute argues that comics' formal features are conducive to the depiction of traumatic experience: "Lines on the page, in how they juxtapose time and space, convey the simultaneity of experience—the different competing registers—so often a feature of traumatic experience, such as the concomitant presence and absence of memory, consciousness, agency, and affect" (262). Zograf's lines, in their representations of subjectivity, capture both his memory of Serbia in the nineties and his decision not to represent it through more objective methods. The subjective imagery evokes comics depictions of the former Yugoslavia perhaps more familiar to many Westerners than Zograf's work: Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) and *The Fixer* (2003). Chute describes Sacco as "an interlocutor for testifying witnesses" with an emphasis on conveying victims' stories (206). This interest in showing experience intersects with Zograf's focus on expressing the subjectivities of experiences of warfare. Zograf's interests likewise align his work with Joe Kubert's *Fax from Sarajevo* (1998), in which Kubert draws the experiences of Ervin Rustemagic and his family surviving Serbian bombings of Bosnia. But whereas the details of Sacco's environments and Kubert's vivid colors situate the reader in specific locations, Zograf's subjective imagery concentrates on the interior emotions of life in the former Yugoslavia in the nineties.

Such depictions require the participation of both the cartoonist and the reader. Simon Grennan, in an interpretation of comics readership echoing the concerns

of reader-response criticism, notes that understandings of comics rely on an exchange “between active subjects,” referring to an artist and her reader (71). Thus, comics “embody subjectivity” through the efforts of the artist and her audience in conjunction with one another (71). *Regards from Serbia* calls attention to such embodiment through Zograf's explicit embrace of subjectivity: Zograf depicts not the literal world around him, but the subjective experiences of those inhabiting that world. The inclusion of introductory material by Ware and Monty Python member Terry Jones highlights how Zograf's depictions of those experiences have reached Western audiences. Vervaeet describes Zograf's comics as being in part “an attempt to explain the complexity of the Yugoslav wars to foreign readers” (163). This attempt also demonstrates the aptness of comics for conveying depictions of wartime trauma.

### Comics on Comics

Zograf also depicts his experiences through metatextual self-awareness and intertextual references, working in the vein of cartoonists such as Art Spiegelman and Ware, who call attention to the traditions and formal lineages of comics in their work. Zograf highlights the conditions of self-representation in comics throughout *Regards from Serbia*, and these conditions are in part specific to his Serbian identity. Like the explicit depiction of subjectivity, metatextuality reinforces his depiction of trauma.

A primary example of metatextuality can be seen in Zograf's references to animation, the significance of which he explains in one of the many emails to friends collected in the book. Zograf writes about his confusion over the plethora of humorous animation produced during World War II: “I was always puzzled by the fact that some of the craziest, funniest ever cartoons were produced exactly during one of the bleakest moments in the history of the human kind” (120). Understandably, Zograf sees a disconnect between the horror of war and the humor it facilitates. Yet his own experience of wartime allows him to understand their connection: “But now, during the big turmoil in my country at the end of the 20th century, I can understand that the very bleakness of the situation is producing a great need for humor, and perhaps it is a natural reaction” (120). In spite of his initial bewilderment, Zograf reacts to bleakness in a similar way.

In his comics, Zograf illustrates the same sentiment expressed in the e-mails. In an early panel, Aleksandar watches a cartoon wolf with bulging eyes on TV while a thought balloon captures his reaction: “Look at that Tex Avery cartoon, made during the Second World War. Great humor, despite being created during such troubled times” (11). Here, Zograf merely watches the cartoon, but in a later strip, he draws iconic cartoon characters caught in some of the situations he sees around him (Fig. 2).

For example, atop a caption reading, “This really happened in Belgrade,” Zograf draws a tearful Tom and Jerry looking at their house with an unexploded



Fig. 2. Zograf's use of cartoon characters from *Regards from Serbia*, Top Shelf, 2007, p. 188.

bomb sticking out of it. In another sarcastic caption, Zograf writes, "A part of an unexploded projectile is still visible to the swimmers and the tourists visiting the idyllic Duckburg Lake," and the words adorn an image of anthropomorphic ducks swimming in a lake alongside a bomb (188). As in Zograf's email, Aleksandar initially struggles to understand how artists can react to war with comedy. But like the artists themselves, Zograf comes to see and demonstrate the power of using cartoonish humor to depict painful experiences.

Zograf particularly emphasizes the significance of Disney animation in Serbian life. The ducks are strongly reminiscent of Disney duck characters, and Zograf

explains that the similarity is no coincidence: “It is even announced that in November Walt Disney Company will start to license their products to Serbia again” (62). In the panel sharing this caption, two characters similar to Mickey Mouse stand outside Aleksandar’s window, and a vase next to him is shaped like a mouse’s head on top (62). In the following panel, a sleeping Aleksandar dreams of Donald Duck (62). Prior to this, Zograf explains that Serbian cartoonists in the 1930s would draw Disney characters in Serbian settings, and that local newspapers published Mickey Mouse strips even under the strictest communist control (33). Mickey Mouse appeared in the pages of *Veseli Četvrtak*, drawn by artists such as Ivan Shenshin and Bozidar Kovacevic (Zupan 90). The character also showed up repeatedly in the magazine *Politika*, as well as in animated form in Belgrade cinemas (Zupan 92). These publications and others contributed to the “Belgrade Circle” of the 1930s, which, as José Alaniz writes, “pioneered the industry in what was then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes” (58). Zograf references their work through characters who inhabit his dream-like representations of the world. He identifies these depictions as “bizarre” in another panel in which Aleksandar dreams of a fearful-looking Mickey climbing a tree and clinging to its branches (224). Like the World War II-era animators, Zograf reacts to dark situations with the levity of cartoon animals. This reaction also suggests the work of Dada artists, who used the absurd to critique what Amelia Jones describes as “the bottomless pit of the military maw” (51). In Zograf’s comics, the absurdity of the references to animation gains further significance through his Serbian nationality due to the importance of Disney’s work in Serbia.

However, Zograf’s cartooning points of reference clearly go far beyond Disney, as can be seen in his depiction of his own artistry. Aleksandar dreams of the legendary comix artist R. Crumb, who tells him, “Don’t believe everything you see” (176).<sup>4</sup> Later in the book, Zograf likens Serbian paramilitary leader Željko Ražnatović to a “disturbing omnipotent baby-faced character from R. Crumb’s comics,” then imitates a Crumb panel next to the text (204). Zograf constantly highlights the development of this style, such as in a panel where Aleksandar draws a strip and the accompanying text reads, “it’s a pleasure to return to my inner world” (13). In a later panel, Zograf cites the role of comics in Aleksandar’s way of seeing, as a thought balloon next to him as he walks down a street reads, “I saw a complete comic book in my dream last night... Wish I remembered it too” (23). An adjacent thought balloon shows Aleksandar envisioning a series of panels (23). Thus, Zograf signals his own artistic influences behind the representation of Serbian life in *Regards from Serbia*.

Zograf also shows others attempting to reconcile with the challenge of depicting wartime through artistic expression, furthering the range of his metatextuality. In a strip showing two artists side by side, one thriving and one lacking in “will and life energy,” Zograf captures two different cartoonists’ reactions to the “situation” of wartime Serbia (27). Zograf illustrates the different ways in which artists depict their



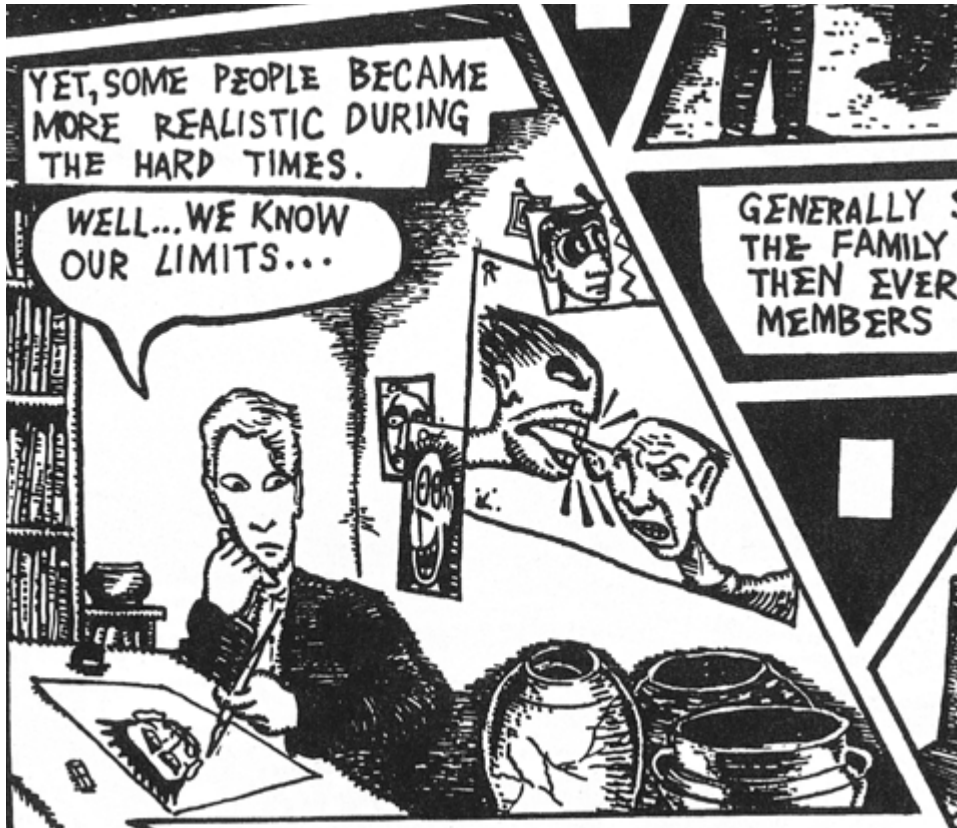


Fig. 3. Zograf draws another artist from *Regards from Serbia*, Top Shelf, 2007, p. 45.

surroundings, such as in his drawing of an artist who “became more realistic during the hard times,” and who looks at a surrealist work (showing a man biting a bizarre-looking growth on another man’s face) hanging on his wall while creating a more conventional image of a human face (Fig. 3).

This artist appears to have an approach to depicting war opposite to Zograf, who thereby shows a spectrum of artistic reactions to the violence in Serbia. He also looks beyond artists, describing children as “gifted in expressing their own unique ideas,” accompanied by a chalk drawing of a large-headed figure in the middle of a street (50). Zograf thereby shows how a variety of people use art as a means for expressing the trauma of living through wartime Serbia.

Yet although Zograf and other artists mediate their representations, *Regards from Serbia* also emphasizes the fundamental challenge of artistically expressing traumatic experiences. In another panel showing Aleksandar drawing, he asks, “Where is this leading to?” followed by a panel of him ripping the drawings in half (22). Similarly, Aleksandar loses patience with his art in another panel, in which

he cries, "What the hell am I doing? This comic wasn't supposed to be funny" while angrily jabbing his pen against the page (58). Although Zograf does suggest humor as a means of coping with painful experiences, the comedy here appears to have escaped Aleksandar's control. Thus, just as Zograf shows people using their fantasies for visions of both optimism and destruction, *Regards from Serbia* captures people expressing themselves through art as well as exposing its limitations.

## Expressing Trauma

Theories of trauma suggest possible interpretations of Zograf's various methods for depicting his traumatic experiences through a series of mediations. These mediations align with the work of theorists such as Caruth, who discuss the challenge traumatized victims face in expressing their pasts and the various means through which they do so. Caruth refers to trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). Traumatic experience thereby is "a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness" (5). *Regards from Serbia* exemplifies this simultaneity and its connection with the wound Caruth describes. The decision to forgo realism epitomizes trauma's unavailability: the layers of Zograf's depictions demonstrate the challenges of presenting more direct testimony of trauma. At the same time, Zograf's absorbing ways of depicting his past demand our attention in the manner Caruth suggests while avoiding realist representation.

Instead of realism, many artists turn to surrealism to represent traumatic experiences. Arva introduces the term "traumatic imagination" to describe authors' use of the imagery of magical realism to illustrate their trauma (5). Such imagery can be seen in Zograf's references to animation and in his drawings of people's visions, both of which present surreal images as part of everyday existence. Arva argues that textual products of the traumatic imagination should be thought of "not as an escape from horrific historical 'facts' or as a distortion meant to make them more cognitively or emotionally palatable but rather as one of the most effective means of re-creating, transmitting, and ultimately coping with painful traumatic memories" (5-6). Accordingly, Zograf does not distort his trauma, but instead presents it through methods helping him to cope with the pain. *Regards from Serbia* depicts wartime Serbia for readers who have not lived through it by illustrating the experience through people's subjectivities and metatextual self-awareness.

Zograf's deviations from realist depiction epitomize what Michael Rothberg calls "traumatic realism." As Rothberg points out, texts can work towards the aims of realism while at the same time defying categorization as realist (99). Rothberg suggests that works of traumatic realism share realism's desire for "some kind of reference and

some kind of narrative” while also demonstrating “a form of documentation beyond direct reference and coherent narrative” (101). Zograf’s emails particularly exemplify such documentation, as they convey records of his experiences across a variety of formats. Although Zograf populates his comics with specific references to real people, places, and events, he also frequently adds absurd details, such as Tom and Jerry next to a bomb in a house (188). Zograf thereby disturbs the ostensible coherence of the world of his comics, but this disturbance can be understood as an example of traumatic realism.

## Towards Surrealism

While some imagery in *Regards from Serbia* can be explained through characters’ subjectivities or metatextuality, other drawings cannot be rationalized as easily. Throughout the book, Zograf presents wholly surreal images; unlike the previous aspects of the book I have discussed, these images are not presented as the products of artistic fancy or people’s imaginations. In another email, Zograf indicates a possible rationale for such illustrations: “The very sight of old monastery surrounded by oil refinery [sic] is one of the more surrealist sights that you can see anywhere. Bombs exploding around it makes it even more unreal” (110). The cruel absurdity of reality appears to overtake fantasy, and for Zograf, surrealism is the last resort for representation. Zograf can also be linked to a tradition of surrealist art in Serbia dating to the 1920s and 1930s, when Serbian and French Surrealists exchanged ideas and published in each other’s journals. One such example is the journal *Nemogućé—L’impossible* [The impossible] (1930), directed by Yugoslav surrealist poet Marko Ristić, which contained “manifestos, theoretical texts, statements, surveys, the history of Surrealism in Belgrade, automatic texts, poems, letters, photograms, collages, and drawings” (Uzelac 154). This particular Yugoslav branch of surrealism emphasized the Freudian unconscious, was more socially engaged than the French variant and inspired by Marxism, and was distinctly leftist in focus (Uzelac 154). Ultimately the increasingly totalitarian Yugoslav state found the activities of the group unacceptable, and they had to disband by 1932 (Fijałkowski 166). Zograf was influenced not only by the main tropes of surrealism—the preoccupation with the unconscious and dreams, most prominently—but by the leftist political stance of these early avant-gardes, and he uses a similar idiom to express the absurdity and despair he feels as an individual caught in the midst of the civil wars that tore apart Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Zograf focuses on a specific act of violence especially pertinent to nineties Serbia: the United States sponsored bombing. The 1999 attacks on government and military targets responded to Milosevic’s refusal to sign a peace treaty (Gagnon 125). It has been estimated that Serbia sustained more than \$4 billion in damages to buildings and infrastructure as a result of the attacks (Sell 359). Gow and Michalski describe buildings

devastated by the bombings as “the pockmarks of the political disease that blighted Serbia for over ten years” (143). Zograf depicts this devastation through a sardonic approach by describing the bombs as “intelligent, smart” (171). In the accompanying image, a smiling Aleksandar rubs an anthropomorphized bomb, which has glasses and an open mouth (171). Anthropomorphic bombs, which are described as “cute” and “friendly, decent,” pervade the page, accompanied by people clamoring for their arrival as they fall from the sky (171). Zograf’s corrosive humor mocks the bombings’ deadliness. This bitter irony is also a response to the Western media’s depiction of Serbians as villains, in part due to atrocities such as the deaths of 12,000 Albanians as the result of the 1998 and 1999 Serbian campaigns in Kosovo (Sell 360). Zograf’s gallows humor towards the bombs continues in a later panel, which shows a bomb colliding with the head of a cheerful civilian (210). Although Zograf does not depict the bombings through realism, the irony of fantastical imagery captures his attempt to cope with their destruction. His jokes further suggest a removal from the events, which nonetheless come through in the violence being represented.

Surrealism perhaps best captures the fundamental disarray Zograf experiences as a result of the trauma of Serbian life. Zograf describes the international blame being directed towards Serbia as a “mess,” then illustrates the mess as fingers pointing at one of three heads lying on a single body (21). In another panel, Zograf refers to “confused and bewildered people [who] found their comfort in following their national leaders,” followed by an image of a large, mysterious figure coveting a crowd of tiny people in his arms (38). Both of these images illustrate the confusion and disorder in Serbia in the nineties, but through drawings merely alluding to rather than directly depicting the causes of the confusion. Zograf most explicitly draws his own bewilderment in successive panels showing Aleksandar discussing the pros and cons of staying in Serbia with human-like figures with the heads of a bird, sheep, and horse, respectively (49). Aleksandar struggles with the decision of whether or not to leave, and the absurdity of the animal-headed people calls attention to the difficulty of making sense of the situation.

Zograf’s surreal images go beyond the boundaries of realism to capture his subjective impression of wartime Serbia throughout *Regards from Serbia*. These fantastic visions—sometimes horrifying, sometimes humorous—contrast with the relatively unadorned text, suggesting the failure of words alone to capture the physical, emotional, and psychological violence Zograf witnesses. This contrast, like *Regards from Serbia* as a whole, illustrates the capacity of comics to capture the affect of trauma.

## Notes

- 1 I argue that Zograf’s work fulfills the objective of surrealism as defined by André

- Breton: the “final unification...[of] interior reality and exterior reality” (116). The simultaneous depiction of the interior emotions of Zograf and other Serbians and the exteriority of their sociocultural circumstances epitomizes this unification.
- 2 My understanding of realism relies on Erich Auerbach’s description of it as being the “serious treatment of everyday reality” (491). Although Zograf depicts serious subject matter, the absurdism with which he treats it and the deviation from the everyday in his imagery contrast with Auerbach’s definition.
  - 3 The misspelling of English words emphasizes the foreignness of Zograf’s work, particularly for Western readers such as Ware and Jones.
  - 4 Zograf’s comics also show echoes of Crumb’s influence in the references to talking animal characters from American animation. Hatfield describes a key interest of Crumb’s late sixties work as being “to reclaim bygone images from American popular culture...and invest them with new, subversive meanings” (11). These images include anthropomorphized animals, which Zograf likewise recontextualizes in a comparable manner.

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# Dragana Obradović

## Filial Estrangement and Figurative Mourning in the Work of Nina Bunjevac

### The Family Album and the Search for the Father

**F***atherland*, a graphic memoir published in 2015 by Serbian-Canadian artist Nina Bunjevac, which appeared in multiple translations and achieved notable success on the *New York Times* comics bestseller list, is an autobiographical story of emigration and political radicalization among the Serbian diaspora in North America in the 1960s and 70s. It follows Bunjevac's critically acclaimed 2012 collection *Heartless*, in which the subjectivities and complex desires of economically impoverished, socially marginalized migrants takes center stage. The stories of queer and surreal characters in *Heartless* explore alterity (of gender, sexuality, exile) in a visual style that has been described as "a poetics based on a foregrounded citationality" that brings together pop art references, classic Hollywood iconography, and recontextualized pin-up sirens.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, *Heartless* wears its genealogy on its sleeve: it is influenced by the aesthetic register of the underground comix scene of the 1960s and is equally alternative in its political gestures.

Drawn in a black and white pointillist style, *Fatherland* is more realist in its register with significant deviations into the symbolic terrain. The graphic memoir explores how individual agency is conditioned by historical circumstances through a posthumous reconstruction of the life of the author's nationalist, anti-communist father Peter. As the narrative acknowledges, his is an enigmatic portrait that remains only "semi-complete" even as it details his childhood traumas, his orphanhood, eventual exile in Canada, and his turn towards political extremism that results in his violent death from a bomb explosion.<sup>2</sup> This troubled life, narrated in fragments, is the pivot from which *Fatherland* evolves into an exploration of historical contingency, nationalism, and the tyranny of ideologies.

As a material object, *Fatherland* is designed to look like a photo album with a red border on the spine and the father's portrait adorning the front. The graphic memoir



assumes the genre of a family chronicle, though it becomes clear rather quickly how significantly compounded by long-held secrets and suppressed memories the archive actually is. It is almost as if the excess of spectacle that was her father's death produced a vacuum and terrorism usurped his biography. Unlike a family album, which promises a hermetic display of domestic history based on compositional principles of happiness and harmony, *Fatherland* rejects the demands of the genre. Notably, the story opens with Bunjevac reckoning with her mother's induced amnesia when she fails to recognize images of the home she shared with her husband and young children: "It looks awfully familiar—what is it?" she asks upon seeing a satellite image of the home. Bunjevac's response is to interpret her mother's "choosing to forget this little house" as "a desperate attempt to suppress all the memories it once held, good and bad."

The satellite image that does little to trigger the mother's memories draws the reader's attention to the importance of photographic discourse. The photograph is at once an archival source and means of composition for Bunjevac. The book is replete with drawings of photographs—drawn by hand, rather than reproduced as scans—of personal and public origin. Sometimes these images function as documents, as constitutive of the archives. Others, however, are synthesized into the *mise-en-scène* of the panel so it is impossible to differentiate the present time of narration from old photographs. Bunjevac has discussed in interviews how she relied on photographs and postcards in order to capture period detail of clothes, interiors, cars, and facades. The precision and exactitude of Bunjevac's method is in kinship with Alison Bechdel's own creative process in *Fun Home* (2006): Bechdel's laborious drawing, copying, and replicating, argues Hillary Chute, is a type of embodiment through which the author "reinhabit[s] the elements of her past to re-present them—and to preserve them, to publically rearchive them."<sup>3</sup>

The question then is—to what end? What is *Fatherland's* "re-archiving" about? The narrative fractures of Bunjevac's story—which are for the most part memory ruptures—are not plumbed in order to undertake a reparative project through the graphic form. Instead, Bunjevac signals the ambiguity of excavating family history for the purposes of facing the traumatic wound on the cover itself. The portrait of the father on the cover references the color scheme of the Nazi flag (black, white, and red), thereby telegraphing the shame of her father's life that continues to leak into the present, beyond the family album. Thus, even before the story begins, the reader is introduced to an inherent tension between the father as a subject of grief *and* betrayal—an ambivalence created by the opportunities of the comics medium with its unique idiom of text, image, and the gutter.

My article takes its cue from this ambivalent inscription of the father into the family album. I analyze Bunjevac's memoir as a story of "unsettling fixed subjectivit[ies]," to borrow a phrase from Chute, and note how "conflicting registers and different temporalities" are employed in Bunjevac's self-representations

particularly as they pertain to material “typically relegated to the silence and invisibility of the private.”<sup>4</sup> As Deborah James writes, Bunjevac “draws the story out of the gutters and into the present day, destabilizing public memories of Peter Bunjevac as a terrorist/hero by drawing on [her mother’s] collaborative, intimate, and personal stories.”<sup>5</sup> In *Fatherland*, self-representation principally demands getting to know a father who is both a perpetrator and victim of violence. This is tricky territory to negotiate, particularly as the intimate sphere of female experience is not exclusively a refuge. Eavesdropping, secrecy, and willful forgetfulness within the family dynamic are just as prevalent as female attachment and trust. In a scene depicting a birthday party celebration of Bunjevac’s older sister Sarah in the late 1970s, fragments of a family argument—“Tell your daughter never to mention that man [Bunjevac’s father] in this house again!” to “Get out of my house!” and “You’re worse than Hitler!”—are superimposed over the scenes of kids standing around a cake and Sarah blowing out candles. The sentence “that man” is uttered by her grandmother who also criticized him for being a “cold-blooded murderer” not willing to politically reform for his family. In this contrast between scenes of domestic celebration (enabled by the photograph as document of memory) and scenes of tension and disagreement, Bunjevac foregrounds the challenges posed by the domestic topoi for the purposes of recuperation. She complicates the idea that female perspectives and female bonding can remain an unchallenged arena of intimacy that will solve the political and affective dimensions of her own identity and her relationship to past and contemporary political structures.

In my analysis of *Fatherland* and a short companion piece that preceded it titled “August, 2017” (published in 2012), I focus on the visual idiom Bunjevac develops in order to ethically and historically reanimate the father. In my examination of specific scenes, I argue that this involves fictional encounters between individuals (e.g. father and daughter) that foreground small acts of acknowledgment, accountability, and mourning. This task, however, is complicated by the fact that *Fatherland* is not exclusively a personal history. The graphic memoir is also a digest of twentieth-century history: Bunjevac’s ancestors were forced to migrate to North America in the early 1900s due to socio-economic deprivation in their Serb-majority village in Croatia; later some members perish in World War II death camps; others—namely her father—witness the German occupation, defeat, and the arrival of Tito’s Partisans. Consequently, parts of her family become ideological enemies, split between communism and nationalism. The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s is the ghost of the future that lingers at the margins of the memoir.

The critical reception of Bunjevac’s text indicates that *Fatherland’s* treatment of this historical material is not simply relegated to a world whose coordinates have been reconfigured since the collapse of state socialism in 1989. However, responses to *Fatherland* depend on where the book is read. Bunjevac has attributed the success

of the graphic narrative in North America to the geopolitical context post-2001 and its fascination with terrorism.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, following the attack on the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, Bunjevac noticed a shift in the conversation around *Fatherland* while promoting the book in France. *Fatherland* offered, in the aftermath of the attack, a narrative examination of home-grown terrorism which, Bunjevac added, France was starting to face as a society.<sup>7</sup> These particular filters treat Bunjevac's life experience as a universal paradigm from which lessons and knowledge about the psyche of individual terrorists can be extracted. In a radio interview for the Canadian broadcaster CBC, Bunjevac was prompted to reflect on "why young people turn to extremism" and answered that, in her view on the matter, "behind every terrorist there's a genuine feeling of injustice."<sup>8</sup>

These particular ways of framing the narrative empty out the historical thrust of Bunjevac's story and do not engage with the palimpsest of the family biography as a residual, painful testimony of various historical flashpoints of the twentieth century. Nor do these readings address how this past makes claims on Bunjevac's present. This demand is illustrated in an image of her father as a young boy at the end of World War II, where Bunjevac depicts him gazing directly beyond the frame into a space beyond the page, at the reader. Her caption reads: "[m]y father watched history unfold before his bedroom window." By short circuiting the temporal distance between the young boy (her future father) and the reader, the subject position of the reader is to witness what he could only watch: both the reader and Bunjevac (by drawing, composing, writing) have access to ethical and affective contemplation, but the boy did not understand what larger forces were shaping his future.

These forces of her father's past are also integral to contemporary politics and socio-historic dynamics of post-Yugoslav states, a dimension of *Fatherland* that came to full expression after its publication in Serbia, which is, in various ways, still in the shadow of 1990s ethnonationalism and authoritarianism (as of 2019). For all it's pro-EU sloganeering and campaigning, Serbian public discourse has been marked by a high degree of media control since 2014, when Aleksandar Vučić, the President as of 2018, became Prime Minister and governed with a strong monopoly of state and private institutions (namely the media sector).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, there has been a significant push since at least the mid-2000s to rehabilitate World War II collaborators and rescue figures like Draža Mihailović (leader of the Serbian Chetniks, a military collaborationist unit) from the "taint" placed upon them during socialism. This is part of a broader culture of historical revisionism propagated on multiple levels—academic, legal, social.<sup>10</sup> Various commentators who have followed the juridical process around the rehabilitation of individuals like Draža Mihailović and Milan Nedić, the collaborationist leader of Serbia's quisling government between 1941 to 1944, argue that these processes normalize the crimes committed by these historical figures and legitimize their ideological commitments (fascism in the case of Nedić).<sup>11</sup>

Bunjevac's father idolizes Mihailović, calls him a "true hero" and displays his bust in his home—a sequence of pages that I discuss later in this chapter.

In this climate of revisionism in contemporary Serbia, communist history is discussed and exhibited according to one of the following tracks: it is either presented through a critical lens of communist governance (with a focus on authoritarian tendencies of Tito's Communist Party) or it is a celebration of communism as an aesthetic happening (e.g. the exhibit of design during socialist Yugoslavia at the Museum of Yugoslav History). Moreover, post-Yugoslav states, from Serbia to Croatia, have experienced a specific erasure of socialist memory, particularly in the context of its progressive politics and aspirations to social equity. Memories of socialist Yugoslavia circulate in public discourse through ahistoricized, apolitical, and commodified nostalgia, which tends to neutralize revolutionary politics of the left that are at the core of Yugoslavia's existence. Nostalgia for Yugoslavia often takes a commodity-based form: souvenirs, trinkets, clothing, and advertising all mine the socialist past for images and icons of a common, bygone culture. "Stripped from its historical moorings," writes Zala Volčić, "the Yugoslav past has become one more free-floating signifier of consumer desire."<sup>12</sup> Shared experiences—from Yugo disco parties to online forums and sites—provide further means of engagement for individuals seeking to repair the loss of a common culture and history. This nostalgia is never explicitly couched in terms of nostalgia for socialism as a political program even though, as Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat point out in their volume *Welcome to the Desert of Post-socialism*, contemporary feelings of economic and political disempowerment, should be read precisely as an expression of the loss of "generous socialist politics of the former socialist states."<sup>13</sup> Hindering the reading of nostalgia as a progressive force, add Štiks and Horvat, is the general perception that the post-Yugoslav states are "a lost cause for progressive forces after 1989 and prone only to right-wing politics and extremism, support of pro-US and pro-NATO policies, and unconditional surrender to neoliberalism."<sup>14</sup>

Bunjevac has been explicit in interviews about her left-leaning politics and political identification with Yugoslavia's social model: "I'm a socialist. I am for socialism and self-management. [...] I am against imperialism, against destructive capitalism."<sup>15</sup> Her public declarations about her own ideological beliefs, together with *Fatherland's* explicit critique of ethnonationalism—as well as the relationship between nationalism and masculinity—is a challenge to Serbia's current self-image. In particular, it is a critique mounted through the genre of comics whose legacy in this particular geographic locale is one of underground "amateurism."<sup>16</sup> Namely, Bunjevac directly links the ideological persuasion of political émigré organizations (such as the one her father belonged to) with Serbian ethnonational politics of the 1990s. Thus, marginal radical figures espoused a politics that became normalized. *Fatherland* gives an account of a group called "Freedom for Serbian

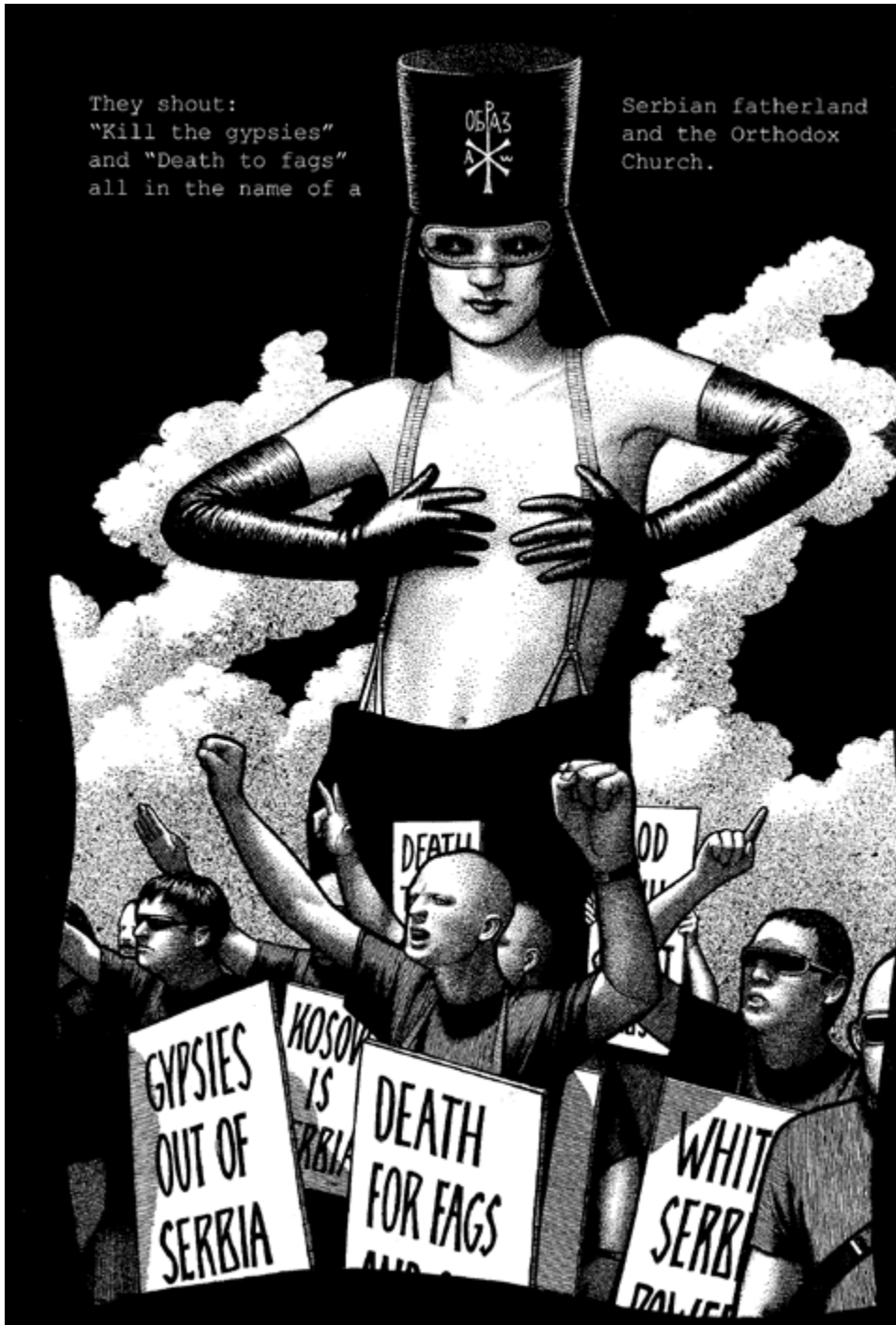


Fig. 1. Nina Bunjevac, "August, 1977."

Fatherland” (*Srpski Oslobodilački pokret Otadžbina*, or SOPO) to which Bunjevac’s father belonged while residing in Ontario in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> SOPO is described in the graphic narrative as “the first secret Serbian terrorist organization” loyal to the Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović and that gave prominent leadership roles to Orthodox priests.<sup>18</sup> The young men of SOPO were Serbian nationalist émigrés united in their aim, says Bunjevac, of taking down the Yugoslav government, namely through “propaganda literature in the diaspora, then attacks on the homes of prominent Yugoslavs and diplomatic folks. The third way was to infiltrate the military in Yugoslavia.”<sup>19</sup> The peak of their activity occurred in the early 1970s with attacks on Yugoslav consulates and embassies in North America.<sup>20</sup> Their activities spawned many myths and legends. Bunjevac believes that after Tito’s death, stories about SOPO and other members of the political emigration were popularized: “They were our Cosa Nostra or something like that, our bad boys on the outside.”<sup>21</sup>

Bunjevac makes the case in *Fatherland* and the shorter piece “August, 1977” that these radical organizations are prototypes to right-wing nationalist groups in Serbia, especially those of para-military formation that participated in the break-up of Yugoslavia. From that perspective, their legacy is far more destructive and virulent because the radical and marginal beliefs of the father gained some form of legitimacy in contemporary Serbia. Yet Bunjevac’s graphic memoir moves beyond this political division and complicates the image of her father and his legacy.

### **Father as Traumatized Subject**

“August, 1977” begins with a symbolic depiction of the illicit, underground nature of her father’s life, suggested by the appearance of a predatory cat that ominously looks through the windows of a basement apartment. Told in a claustrophobic sequence of panels, this strip is an account of the final hours of his life. With the first image of a bomb kit in preparation, it becomes clear that the space of the apartment functions as a tomb. The silence of the image is contrasted by the narrative voice resting outside of the frame: it belongs to an estranged wife, whose absence is signaled by the mediating form of a letter and a family photograph. Notably, she uses “Dear husband” as the form of address to foreground that the only remaining commitment they have to each other is legal;<sup>22</sup> otherwise, all intimacy and warmth has been evacuated. When the bomb’s timer reads 2:38, the narrative voice switches and is taken over by a grown daughter who speaks from a future that the father will never experience. Yet it is a future he has had a part in creating: the daughter speaks of victorious “patriots” who “have the blood of the innocent on their hands” and who are “terrorizing their own people” and who represent the ideological and historical extension of her father’s political convictions.<sup>23</sup> August, 1977 as a specific time stamp is abandoned here for a representation of post-Yugoslav Serbia gripped by a clerical ethnonationalism that, in Bunjevac’s

depiction, authorizes racism and xenophobia as a constituent part of its identity. In the caption, the daughter bitterly laments, “They shout ‘Kill the Gypsies!’ and ‘Death to fags’ all in the name of a Serbian fatherland and the Orthodox Church”<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 1).

This text is accompanied by a deeply layered visual plane. The page shows a female figure, young and seductive, towering over a group of protesting young men, all of whom belong to a right-wing Christian group called “Obraz,” who were banned by the Constitutional Court of Serbia in 2012. The young woman is modeled on the character of Lucia (played by Charlotte Rampling) in Liliana Cavani’s 1974 film *The Night Porter*. In the first two illustrations, this figure wears a hat initially deocrated with the insignia of the Orthodox Church and then of “Obraz.” More specifically, the image is taken from the scene in the deportation camp where Lucia, a young Jewish woman, performs a song by Marlene Dietrich for Nazi officers as she dons an SS cap. “The reference to *The Night Porter*,” writes Mihaela Precup, “spells out the connection between German fascism and Serbian ultranationalism.”<sup>25</sup> This is, indeed, the overarching political critique that Bunjevac is leveling at contemporary Serbia. Yet other valences are in play, since the depiction of the young woman as a spectre of Cavani’s Lucia is deeply ambiguous: her identity is unknown, her relationship to the young men of Obraz unclear (though she is obviously dressed in their garb), and the relevance of her gender in the context of nationalism is obscure. In this intentionally provocative two-page spread, it is obvious that the young woman is performing a seduction through the recognizable gestures of the cabaret dancer.<sup>26</sup> Here it seems that Bunjevac is translating the allure of ideology into the figure of an erotic female. In this reading, nationalism as ideology takes on the aspect of gender: ideology as the female body is an object of fantasy and fascination.

This characterization calls to mind the exposition on “fascist aesthetics” by Susan Sontag who argues that the performativity of “fascist dramaturgy” involves the exaltation of “two seemingly opposite, states,” including “the relations of domination and enslavement,” familiar to us from Nazi pageantry.<sup>27</sup> The depiction of enslavement in “August, 1977” appears in the third and final sequence, when the body is in the position of suffering and humiliation. This image is less explicitly feminized and the face is entirely covered by a hood, again with a hat that bears the cross of the Christian Orthodox Church. The figure is at once vulnerable and subservient—as Bunjevac visually represents it—to the clerical-fascism of the Christian Orthodox Church. Signs of humiliation and shame are undeniable: the figure is standing in a puddle, perhaps urine, and is caught in the act by a spotlight that forces them against the wall. This “exposure” of a subject of ideology discloses a shameful set of beliefs (a point driven home by the textual accompaniment, “the church preaches intolerance”) but more importantly, it reveals a traumatized subject.<sup>28</sup> The hooded figure is clearly a victim of nationalist ideology and Bunjevac raises the possibility of violence perpetrated on individuals within particular belief systems.

The final image of “August, 1977” is of a flock of birds is unleashed into flight by the explosion of the bomb which, argues Precup, represents the symbolic translation of the daughter’s liberation from the father.<sup>29</sup> This reading is borne out by the text on the page: “I have rejected your beliefs, suppressed your rebellious spirit and I found peace. Your battles are not my battles, the chain stops here.”<sup>30</sup> However, the barred windows are the father’s prison—introduced in the first two pages—and so this liberation is equally his, though only in death. Curiously, while Bunjevac’s father died in a bomb explosion, the circumstances surrounding his death and those of two other men from his cell remain shrouded in mystery. Reimagining the death as a suicide in “August, 1977” is the daughter’s creative repositioning of the father as a guilty subject who seeks forgiveness through his own self-destruction. This particular rendition of his death restores a degree of affective and psychological—though not historical—agency to the father, who would otherwise remain static as the hooded, traumatized figure so deeply embedded in the phantasm of nationalism.

### **Father as Child, Father as Monument**

“August, 1977” begins the job of creating the narrative space for conceiving the father as a traumatized subject. *Fatherland* continues this pursuit but does so in tandem with Bunjevac’s own condensed *Bildungsroman*. Attempting to figure out the parameters of her father’s identity, (though she has no memory of him, nor any emotional attachment), offers the simultaneous crystallization of Bunjevac’s own subjectivity.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, her own experiences act as a mode of reflection for her father’s life: it is a mirror that ultimately fails to offer a unified reflection of two lives and two trajectories. The juxtaposition is thematic but, more crucially, reinforced by the layout and rhythm of *Fatherland*’s panels.

Half-way through *Fatherland* in a chapter titled “Childhood,” Bunjevac details how her father’s early years were marked by tragedy such that the verbal signifier of “childhood” becomes an ironic declaration, one of many examples where the image is undermined by the text. Born in 1936, Peter Bunjevac lost his mother to tuberculosis and his father in Jasenovac, a death camp run by the Ustaše, the Croatian fascist forces. When he began exhibiting symptoms of trauma after the war, including inexplicably torturing animals, Peter’s grandparents sent him to military school hoping that it would instill him with discipline and order. Sometime in the mid-1950s, Peter expresses his support for Milovan Đilas following Đilas’s (hushed) fall from grace in Tito’s Communist Party and is imprisoned on false pretenses of espionage. Released after three years, he realizes he has no future in Yugoslavia. Thus, in *Fatherland*’s storytelling, Peter’s childhood and adolescence never had a chance.

At the end of this section detailing Peter’s life, a black page announces “The Dissident Years.” Instead of continuing the sequence of the father’s life in purgatory and



final migration to Canada, this story is delayed by an intermezzo about Bunjevac's own childhood—a short, connecting movement that serves to relate Bunjevac's experiences as a child and adolescent with that of her father. Thus, the black page has a dual function. It represents the compression of time, thereby separating the reader from Peter's story chronologically, but it also acts as a mirror. Namely, I see the page with intertitles as a gutter that separates two identical periods—childhood of father and that of daughter—which could be seen as mirror images of each other. Ultimately, however, they do not correspond to one another given their separate historical circumstances. Unlike the father's experience of childhood, the daughter's life is free of tyranny and anxiety. She is free to buy Western comics, sing Abba songs, and talk about American TV shows in Tito's Yugoslavia.<sup>32</sup> The daughter is the beneficiary of contentment in a system that "punished" and made an enemy of him. By juxtaposing their experiences and including humor in the scenes of girlhood, Bunjevac signals her compassion and understanding of the poverty of the father's experience. By collapsing the chasm separating the time-space of their respective childhoods through the grammar of the comic (the gutter as a spatial and temporal device), Bunjevac stresses the rupture between their psychic and physical lives even further.

Importantly for the political thrust of *Fatherland*, this filial correspondence is followed by a graphic estrangement from the father through a departure from the realist register. In the pages where Bunjevac narrates the circumstances surrounding the father's burgeoning nationalism, she depicts him as a bust modeled on sculptures of political or national leaders. In fact, she makes that comparison obvious by drawing the bust of Draža Mihailović kept in the family home in Ontario. Even when the father is animated as a bust who speaks and interacts with other characters, it is clear that his ideas are ossified, static, and unchanging: this is dead, stony history. The (political) father, however, can still be powerful even if he is dead.<sup>33</sup>

Modeling her father after a monument is an ambivalent choice in *Fatherland*: it strongly suggests the internalization of paternal authority as a means of continuing historical legacy. It is a legacy that we cannot reject even though we desire to do so. Bunjevac here stages the father in a manner that corresponds with Freud's conception of the family romance. In Freud's conceit, a young child fantasizes that the parents have far more significant social roles than in actuality, which might even include nobility at birth. The child, in order to assemble a coherent psychological sense of themselves, replaces the image of the father with a grander figure, concludes Freud, not in order to kill the father, but to exalt him.<sup>34</sup> Bunjevac's own merging of political father with her mortal father suggests that any such exaltation immediately exceeds the confines of a bourgeois family (which was Freud's unit of analysis): rather, it reproduces the wider social structure and re-legitimizes the father's claim to authority. Though she wants to give up the father's legacy, his continuity is socially mandated, legitimized, and reaffirmed.

This reading complicates precisely those themes of recuperation and redemption in which Bunjevac simply casts off her father's politics as a rite of passage towards establishing her own (creative and political) agency. *Fatherland* communicates that this process is not as simple as a verbal utterance—the “I have rejected your beliefs” stated in “August, 1977”—because the cultural and social frames function subconsciously as traps to keep subjects within a particular range of representations. The heroic bust of the father-leader is archetypal in that regard: it is part and parcel of what Tatjana Rosić calls the “patriarchal Serbian cultural matrix” that keeps reproducing mythical male figures as subject of the perfect biography.<sup>35</sup> In other words, there is some inevitability to the vision in which the father is a monument: Bunjevac cannot but represent the father—a frustrated, lonely man—in a monumental form.

While in “August, 1977” Bunjevac signaled the possibility of reinstating some sort of agency to the father beyond the straitjacketing of the terms terrorist and nationalist, *Fatherland* attempts a rapprochement between daughter and father only to signal the complications that lie therein. This is particularly evident in the impossibility of separating the image of the father from the social and political authority with which paternal figures are imbued. The only proximity between Bunjevac's and the father's subject positions happens within the temporal parameters of childhood. In the next section, I explore how the departure from a realist visual mode enables Bunjevac to circumnavigate the legacies of paternal authority in order to end *Fatherland* in a mode of mourning.

### Father as Subject of Mourning

The narrative arc of *Fatherland* ends with the father's death, the ultimate parting for the daughter and father. Unlike “August, 1977,” *Fatherland* avoids the visual excess of the bomb explosion but nonetheless introduces a dramatic visual gesture. This rejection of violent spectacle is not an idle choice in the context of the contemporary mass media landscape where evocations of terrorism have very specific valences. A spectacle functions as a psychological numbing, as a deep freeze of cognition, as possible voyeurism.<sup>36</sup> Instead, the final pages are devoted to the work of mourning through a number of abstract pages, presided over by the symbol of a bird. This type of code switching—what Chute calls “representational collision” in her discussion of Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco—produces a “refusal of synthesis” whereby the comic “holds in tensions ‘realism’ and what would seem to be its other: ‘cartooning’.”<sup>37</sup> Realism denotes veracity, while cartooning conveys exaggeration, caricature, fantasy, and surrealism. Opting for the latter, however, is not to automatically align the comic with levity, frivolity, comedy. Instead, this figurative sequence, which is exclusively wordless, suggests mourning without pathos, without sentimentalism.

The second page of *Fatherland* shows a nest of three coot eggs that Bunjevac is

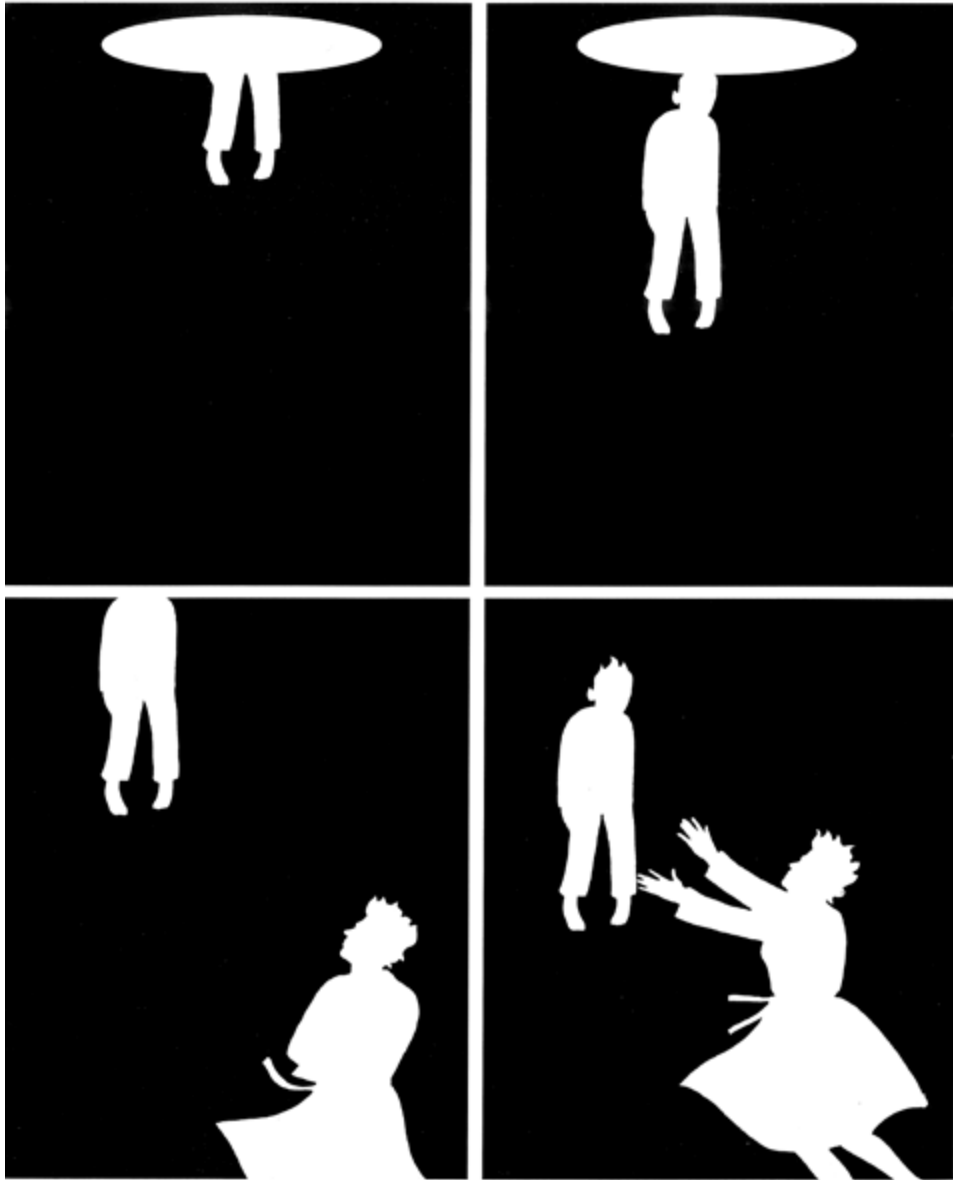


Fig. 2. Nina Bunjevac, *Fatherland*.

drawing as she watches a TV documentary about bird life. The image of the nested eggs is the image of bare, vulnerable life: “The food supply is scarce yet in high demand as there are just too many mouths to feed,” says the documentary narrator, “Hungry chicks beg for food and are in turn punished by the parents... Eventually they will stop begging altogether and starve to death. Out of the roost of nine only two or three coot chicks will survive and make it to adulthood.” The eggs thus come to symbolize the

progeny that needs to survive and that needs nurture and warmth: the three eggs are most likely a reference to the three Bunjevac children, an image that is duplicated a few pages later.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, at one point her father is drawn as a new-born child with his umbilical cord still attached inside a circle, creating visual homology across the memoir. However, between these images of vulnerable subjects encased are narratives of unfulfilled or broken maternal and paternal duties. There is always an element of contingency (i.e. no one sets out to abandon their child, but rather does so in order to survive) and that survival, Bunjevac argues, demands psychic, emotional, or geographical distance. Thus, the final sequence of the novel can be read as addressing this cumulative suffering of parents who lost their children and children who were left behind. Over four pages, exclusively in black and white silhouettes, Bunjevac shows a woman and a young boy in a vertiginous fall through dark tunnels<sup>39</sup> (Fig. 2). Though they embrace, their white silhouettes nonetheless remain suspended in a black symbolic plane. This enigmatic epilogue could represent the father in his youth, traumatized and orphaned, or the son that Bunjevac's mother had to leave behind in Canada in her escape from a volatile domestic environment and her husband. The absence of any index of the real enables a collapse of these generational distinctions, and so multiple losses of the family are considered alongside each other in a suggestive simultaneity. Broken family relationships are ultimately the subject of grief and they bypass the exclusive focus on the authoritative figure of the father.

### **Folklore and Pagan Rituals as a Political Intervention**

The idea of the figurative mode bypassing principles of precision and exactness reverberates on a broader level in *Fatherland*. Bunjevac's visual style is, on the whole, constructed upon elements of photography and photographic discourse that undergird her illustrations with a material referent. But, as exemplified by the final section of *Fatherland*, departure from the realist mode introduces new ways of understanding relationships, history, and the world. Folkloric signs and esoteric symbols that belong to a more figurative realm point to the limits of what can be depicted and known through realism. Balkan dream interpretation, for example, is treated as a discourse of veracity, as a concrete means of navigating life. This is evident in a section where illustrations of dreams are inserted into a "photo album" comprising conventional snapshots of Bunjevac and her sister. Taken in 1976 in Yugoslavia, the photographs were meant "to show my father that we were well taken care of, and happy." As the reader leafs through this "album," it ends not with the photos of the girls but with a strange image of crows lining up on power lines. This seems like a photograph, but is subsequently revealed to be Bunjevac's depiction of a dream. Specifically: before news arrives of Bunjevac's father's death, her grandma dreams of a murder of crows perched on a line and of a man slaughtering a pig. Bunjevac adds: "In the Balkan tradition of

dream interpretation, to dream of birds signifies that the dreamer is about to receive news. Dreaming of raw meat is often seen as a sign of death.” Ultimately, the dream conveys the message as much as the telegram that arrives a few days later. Given that the dream slips into the album—the genre of authentication, of corroboration—means that it is as significant as materialized history.

Related to this episode is a digression into Slavic mythology that appears in a chapter about World War II history in the Balkans, meticulously researched by Bunjevac. This foray into a Pagan history should not be dismissed as esoteric digression because it plays a role in a political intervention. Bunjevac’s accounts and illustrations of Pagan gods and myths—such as the stories of Mokosh, “the protector of women” and Perun, “the god of thunder”—offer a different way of understanding the common heritage of the South Slavs. Bunjevac also offers an alternative visual repertoire since these Pagan deities do not have fixed depictions nor do their images circulate broadly in contemporary culture. That is to say, it is a history within which there is no propagation of ethnic difference and separation precisely because it predates the historical forces that, in a way, created those differences and that, writes Bunjevac in *Fatherland*, “have been exacerbated or further influenced by the invading powers such as Rome, the Byzantine Empire, Venice, Austria, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire.” The rise of the modern nation state in the period of romantic nationalism helped frame anti-colonial uprisings in the Balkans but also drove a wedge between populations in the region. By recounting the numerous pagan deities once feared and respected, Bunjevac foregrounds Slavic mythology as the common root and ancestry of South Slavs who now identify through ethnic separation (e.g. Serbian as distinct from Croatian). It is very telling that these pages—which also function as a lament for a more peaceful past—come after Bunjevac’s harrowing account of Jasenovac, a World War II death camp in Croatia that was run by the Ustaše, a militia group that governed Croatia as a satellite state of Nazi Germany. The Ustaše, under the leadership of Ante Pavelić, pursued a discriminatory policy against the Jewish, Serbian, and Roma populations as well as communists that resulted in mass deportations and killings. The juxtaposition between the atrocities of Jasenovac (that represents the apogee of murder on xenophobic and racist grounds during World War II on Yugoslav territory) and forgotten Slavic mythology enables Bunjevac to displace arguments about the inevitability of history that can occasionally emerge in a chronological rendition of events.

More importantly, there is a correspondence between Bunjevac’s interest in Pagan deities and some of the hybrid characters in *Heartless*, her first comics collection, insofar as these gods are neither fully human nor fully animal but have features of both. They are outside the historical “norm,” much like figures of *Heartless*, whose presence, argues Laura Pearson, raises ethical and theoretical questions about alterity and otherness especially in the context of

gender, sexuality, and agency. She argues that depictions of the “abnormal” often function in problematic ways within discourses and texts: they can be employed in order “to be pathologized or demonized and used as a justified means towards marginalizing and “othering” people, populations, and indeed “things” in themselves. Within a discourse of alterity the challenge becomes, then, finding the means to articulate “otherness” without reinforcing the binaries that underpin hegemony in the first place.”<sup>40</sup> These concerns are relevant for *Fatherland* which performs its own “potential destabilizations” vis-à-vis history and the phantasm of nationalism.<sup>41</sup> The history of Slavic mythology is alternative in relation to empirical, scientific history and is thus marginalized in the hierarchies of conventional knowledge. Bunjevac’s intention in *Fatherland* is not to suggest that her alternative vision can derail contemporary views of Balkan ethnic structures or political schisms. It does send an important warning, however, that—as in the case of her father’s nationalism—historical convictions, in their reified form, can end up as instruments that work against common goals and communal practices.

## Conclusion

**B**etween “August, 1977” and *Fatherland*, the father appears in multiple guises—in various subject positions—demonstrating Bunjevac’s need to experiment with his figure in order to better understand the personal and public impact of his paternity. The graphic memoir, as I have argued, illustrates how these two are integrated: namely, how familial dynamics are transformed by social structures but also how those very same dynamics reinforce lineages of authority. This is what makes Bunjevac’s search for the father so thwarted: she inhabits a present damaged by those who fought for particularized nationalisms—those who are the ideological progeny of her father’s generation. She ultimately locates a space and time of grieving in a figurative language that bypasses his adulthood. She even evokes long-forgotten paradigms of Slavic history that contribute to a more inclusive vision for the region. Even though this vision of communal co-habitation is more idealistic than pragmatic, Bunjevac is led there by the search for the father. The discovery would not have been made without navigating the “fatherland,” its projections, and its fantasies.

## Notes

- 1 Ivana Mance, “Pod navodnicima: ženski strip na Balkanu”, *Ženski strip na Balkanu*, ed. Jukić Pranjić, Irena Jukić Pranjić (Zagreb: Fibra, 2010) 375.
- 2 Nina Bunjevac, *Fatherland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014), no page number. All subsequent references to the graphic narrative will be placed in the main body of

- the text inside quotation marks.
- 3 Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: life narrative and contemporary comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 186.
  - 4 *ibid.*, 5.
  - 5 Deborah James, “Drawn Out of the Gutters: Nina Bunjevac’s Fatherland, a Collaborative Memory.” *Feminist Media Studies* 15.3 (2015), 532.
  - 6 Nina Bunjevac, an interview, “Nina Bunjevac u CZKD, promocija romana u stripu OTADŽBINA” <https://102tube.com/video/uzhL1EKdIBs/nina-bunjevac-u-czkd-promocija-romana-u-stripu-ota.html>. Accessed 10 December 2017.
  - 7 Bunjevac, “Nina Bunjevca u CZKD.”
  - 8 Anna Maria Tremonti, “Graphic novelist Nina Bunjevac recalls how her father was blown up bringing terror to Toronto in ‘Fatherland’”, an interview with Nina Bunjevac, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/isis-vote-fatherland-and-bird-friendly-architecture-1.2907445/graphic-novelist-nina-bunjevac-recalls-how-her-father-was-blown-up-bringing-terror-to-toronto-in-fatherland-1.2907448>. Accessed 18 January 2018.
  - 9 Goran Mišić, “Kako je Evropa zbog medija oborila Vučića na popravni”, *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 03 May 2018, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/kako-je-evropa-zbog-medija-oborila-vucica-na-popravni>
  - 10 When socialist history is mounted by government-funded initiatives it is to recover the sins of the partisans as in the controversial exhibit “In the name of the people” (*U ime naroda*) which was criticized for gross factual and historical inaccuracies, as well as its portrayal of communism as equivalent to fascism.
  - 11 See, for example, Jelena Đureinović, “Normalizacija Milana Nedića,” *Peščanik*, 10 Decembar 2016, <https://pescanik.net/normalizacija-milana-nedica>, and Milivoj Bešlin, “Miland Nedić - rehabilitacija fašizma”, 6 Feb 2016, *Peščanik*, <https://pescanik.net/milan-nedic-rehabilitacija-fasizma/>
  - 12 Zala Volčič, “Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia,” *Critical Studies in Media Communications*, 24:1 (2007), 22.
  - 13 Igor Štikš and Srećko Horvat, “Radical Politics in the Desert of Transition”, in *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia*, eds. Štikš and Horvat (London: Verso, 2015), 7.
  - 14 *ibid.*, 3.
  - 15 Agata Tomažić, “Nina Bunjevac in njen oče, terorist”, *Delo*, <https://www.delo.si/sobotna/ljudje-ki-so-obticali-v-dvajsetem-stoletju-in-ki-se-vedno-zivijo-za-enea-cloveka.html>. Accessed 01 May 2018.
  - 16 Aleksandra Sekulić and Radovan Popović, *The Invisible Comics: Alternative Comics in Serbia, 1980-2010* (Belgrade: National Library of Serbia, 2011), 10.
  - 17 By the 1970s, around 230,000 individuals residing in North America and Western Europe were considered political émigrés by the Yugoslav socialist government. Of

- this number, historians estimate that only one percent were members of organizations promulgating terrorist methods. They represented, in the lexicon of the Yugoslav State Security Services (the state's police apparatus), "extreme" or "hostile" emigrants among whom Chetnik and Ustaše supporters were the most numerous. The aim of these organizations was to overthrow President Tito, destabilize Yugoslavia, and vanquish state socialism. The Yugoslav State Security Services took this percentage seriously and attempted to curb attacks on buildings and institutions, as well as on citizens and embassies; they sought to neutralize emigrant communities and prevent the formation of new organizations.
- 18 This is recounted in the section titled "Exile."
- 19 Dragana Obradović, "'I Only Belong to One Tribe: The Displaced Children of Yugoslavia,'" an interview, *Balkanist*, 14 May 2015. <https://balkanist.net/profile-nina-bunjevac-author-of-fatherland/> Accessed 01 January 2018.
- 20 SOPO was never detained by security forces in Canada or the US, most likely—speculate historians—because the organization's terrorist activity did not include many fatalities or significant material damage. Disbanded after a 1977 plane hijacking in the US orchestrated by Nikola Kavaja (a pivotal figure in Serbian nationalist diaspora circles) and his associates, members of SOPO were arrested and put on trial. Cvetković, "Terorizam i jugoslovenska politička emigracija," *Istorija 20. veka 2* (2014), 186-7.
- 21 Obradović, *Balkanist* interview.
- 22 Bunjevac, "August, 1977" in *Heartless Comics* (Wolfville, N.S.: Conundrum Press, 2012), 97.
- 23 *ibid.*, 103
- 24 *ibid.*, 104.
- 25 Mihaela Precup, "To Dream of Birds: Autobiography, Photography, and Memory in Nina Bunjevac's 'August, 1977' and Fatherland", in *The Canadian Alternative: Cartoonists, Comics, and Graphic Novels*, eds. Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017) 213.
- 26 Cavani's Lucia and Bunjevac's unidentified figure are both channeling performative aspects of Marlene Dietrich's cabaret persona.
- 27 Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, 06 February 1975. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/>. Accessed 30 April 2018.
- 28 Bunjevac, "August, 1977," 105.
- 29 Precup, 213.
- 30 Bunjevac, "August, 1977," 107.
- 31 Tremonti, CBC interview.
- 32 Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), a graphic memoir of the author's coming of age in pre-revolutionary Iran, is the precursor to these scenes of girlhood.



- 33 This characterization of fathers as monuments is extensive in literary and cinematic culture including, for example, Theo Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze* in which pieces of a Lenin statue are dragged downriver.
- 34 Sigmund Freud (1909), "Family Romances", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 239-240.
- 35 Tatjana Rosić, *Mit o savršenoj biografiji: Danilo Kiš i figure pisca u srpskoj kulturi* (Beograd : Institut za književnost i umetnost, 2008) 184.
- 36 See for example, Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she discusses images of suffering and violence, "As objects of contemplation, images of the atrocious can answer to several different needs. To steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself more numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible" (Sontag 98).
- 37 Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 2016) 214.
- 38 In the Serbian edition of *Fatherland*, this image is repeated with only two eggs in the circle—possibly signalling the absence of Peter, Bunjevac's brother, who stayed behind in Canada with the father.
- 39 This is a reoccurring motif in Bunjevac's visual poetics. In *Bezimena* (Fantagraphics Books, 2019), which deals with sexual assault from the perspective of the predator, Bunjevac employs analogous sequences of individuals falling through spirals that relocate them to a different space-time and to a different body. In *Bezimena*, it is the myth of Artemis and Siproites in which Siproites is transformed into a woman after witnessing Artemis bathing (or, in some accounts, attempting to rape her) that offers the background framing for the surreal and symbolic transformation. The opening pages of Bunjevac's work depict a young woman—a follower of the priestess Bezimena—being submerged by Bezimena into water that initiates her physical transformation. Like in *Fatherland*, the fall of this young woman and her birth into a different world as a baby boy (who grows up to be Benny, the sexual predator) is conveyed visually by the shapes of circles and ovals.
- 40 Laura A. Pearson, "Alternative Paradoxes in *Heartless*: Reading (Un-)Love in Nina Bunjevac's 'Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic,'" *Comics Forum*, ed. Ian Hague, 27 May, 2014. Web 11 Feb. 2015, no page number. Accessed 01 May 2018.
- 41 *ibid.*, no page number.

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- . Book panel. "Nina Bunjevac u CZKD, promocija romana u stripu OTADŽBINA" <https://102tube.com/video/uzhL1EKdIBs/nina-bunjevac-u-czkd-promocija-romana-u-stripu-ota.html>.
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- . "Terorizam i jugoslovenska politička emigracija." *Istorija 20. veka* 2 (2014).
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Part one: The Former Yugoslav States

Bunjevac recalls how her father was blown up bringing terror to Toronto in 'Fatherland.'" *CBC Radio*. Web. 1 May 2018.

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# Aleksandra Sekulić

## Reality Check Through the Historical Avant-garde: Danilo Milošev Wostok

**E**merging from the alternative culture of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Yugoslavia and Serbia, Danilo Milošev Wostok made a notable intervention into the legacy of the past: he gave a new reading, a contemporary meaning and life to the texts of the historical avant-gardes and Mittel-European literature in the form of alternative comics; he also revived, re-actualized and emancipated their modes of production. In examining the local contexts of the intervention into the literary canon and its reception, I concentrate on the avant-gardes, their production outside conventional frameworks, and the continuities of radical amateurism in Yugoslavia and Serbia.

### Radical Amateurism and Its Continuities

**A**ccording to Aldo Milohnić, “radical amateurism” describes amateur cultural practices as part of the late 1960s/early 1970s neo-avant-garde, as well as that of the 1980s alternative culture in the former Yugoslavia. These could be interpreted precisely as an opposition to the presupposed professionalism of the cultural elite at the time. It represents a movement “aesthetically unburdened by the media and materials used in their work,” but one which was “participating in a spontaneous ideology of immediate radical intervention in cultural, social and political spheres of Yugoslav society” (Milohnić, 7).

The context which allowed alternative comics to develop their experiments and manifestations—alternative culture in 1990s Serbia—claimed this continuity with the radical amateurism either through their manifestos (Low-Fi Video movement, 1997-2003) or through their contemporary responses and methods of resistance to commodification, professionalization and alienation from culture (the computer demo scene, the Kosmoplovci collective). Danilo Milošev Wostok actively participated in the Low-Fi Video movement, both through his video production and

as a mentor or participant in comics workshops. Later he cooperated with many of the collectives, publishers, manifestations and artists from the alternative culture in the post-Yugoslav region. Due to his experience and continuous work, he remained one of the most emblematic alternative culture figures, as well as a promoter of the self-organized, emancipated production outside conventions and disciplinary limits.

The Low-Fi Video movement (1997-2003) is one of the practices referred to today as an extension of the “radical amateurism” of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFR Yugoslavia) (Milohnić, 7), which emerged after the dissolution of the SFRY in the 1990s. It refers to the organized and coordinated production, distribution and presentation of film and video, grown into a movement whose manifestation and production models were so carefully developed that it can also be called radical for its intervening within the context of 1990s alternative Serbian culture. The Low-Fi Video movement was also extensively intertwined with contemporary media and political discourses. Its models of production and representation, in continuity with Yugoslav cine-amateurism and in collaboration with the international movement Microcinema, enabled involvement of vernacular production together with artistic production in the process of articulation of a new language of alternative culture in Serbia. The premises of the movement and its festivals and manifestations relying on the “democratisation” of artistic practice enabled a wide scope of experiments, freedom and cooperation, but most of all, interdisciplinary production and the flow of ideas comprising the computer demo scene, alternative comics, electronic music, video art, film practice, etc.<sup>1</sup> Among the movement’s collective practices was the workshop or work session which would result in a number of comics in a festival publication, exhibition or a separately published joint comic. Wostok was a frequent participant, often the organizer.

Workshops or sessions organized by Wostok in his hometown of Vršac in the 1990s made alternative comics an accessible form for all, while the themes and later publications gave voice to the otherwise invisible: marginalized or impoverished people from the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Similar open-structure workshops and publications were organized by Saša Rakezić (aka Aleksandar Zograf) in Pančevo.<sup>2</sup> They also were developed in Subotica, the city with the largest festival of Low-Fi Video, which also had an important alternative comics scene. One of the first regional events devoted to alternative culture after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia/Herzegovina took place in Belgrade. XER, organized in 1998 by Radovan Popović (editor of *Striper* magazine) and the Cultural Center REX, facilitated a collective workshop or a session, with results published in a bulletin. The most representative of these was the “Man From the Well,” with its many different styles combining through collaboration. The publications coming out of these workshops<sup>3</sup> demonstrated the wide range of participants, as well as how the collective work in these sessions utilized a specific politics of narration, which relied on the deconstruction of the dominant, oppressive and repetitive propaganda of mainstream media and political

narratives. The form of the deconstruction was often collage, made up of the printed media and imagery of the dominant culture's political/economic/war propaganda combined with pornography or science fiction images; the overall effect is of a fantastical burlesque.<sup>4</sup> Often the direct or indirect inspiration came from the literature of the absurd, as well as tropes derived from Central European literature; the social situations often resembled political satire or the darkest of Kafkaesque stories. Such evocations owed much to the particular fascination with the historical avant-gardes present in 1980s Yugoslavia.

## **Bildungsroman**

**D**ue to the important role played by members of Yugoslav avant-garde groups in the socialist revolution and emancipation of Yugoslavia, as well as in the choice of the Yugoslav leadership in 1948 not to succumb to the pressure of the Cominform (the Communist Information Bureau),<sup>5</sup> but to develop its own socialist system,<sup>6</sup> the texts and the art produced by the dynamic scene of the avant-gardes in the first half of the 20th century were largely present in the country's literature curricula, art education, art histories and popular culture. At the Third Congress of the Writers' Union held in Ljubljana in 1952, Miroslav Krleža, a respected Yugoslav writer from Zagreb, to a large extent resolved the decades-old conflict on the Left.<sup>7</sup> That speech, as a statement of a direction of cultural policy, also led to a flourishing of modernist practices and soon established modernism as the official culture within a permissive socialist cultural system. This aimed to develop the infrastructure for the democratization of arts and culture, but also had the ambition to shape and to participate in larger social processes.<sup>8</sup> Encouraging youth culture through a developed network of student and youth cultural centres and activities, it opened a space for the neo-avant-gardes and artistic practices in conceptual art, film, performing arts, music and literature in the 1970s. These groups opposed the alienation and professionalization of culture, either through the dematerialisation of arts practice or the development of a "new language,"<sup>9</sup> i.e., new models of production which today we may term radical amateurism. They also worked toward new modes of re-actualization of the historical avant-gardes.

In the period that followed, along with the exhibitions of the Yugoslav avant-gardes,<sup>10</sup> publications such as *Mixed Media* by Branko Vučićević and Bora Ćosić, and translations of the Soviet avant-garde, such as Dubravka Ugrešić's rendering of Danil Kharms; feature films such as *Splav meduze* (Raft of the Medusa, 1980), written by Branko Vučićević and directed by Karpo Godina and "The Case of Kharms" (1987), directed by Slobodan Pešić and others;<sup>11</sup> the television drama "The Russian Art Experiment" (1982), by Branimir Dimitrijević and Boris Miljković; the play "Christmas at the Ivanovs" (1983), directed by Haris Pašović and performed at the theater festival MESS in Sarajevo; and similar cultural productions had a considerable impact on youth culture. They



Fig. 1. Wostok's *Barbarogenije*.

became part of the collective Bildungsroman of several generations whose aesthetic experience was connected to alternative culture and music.

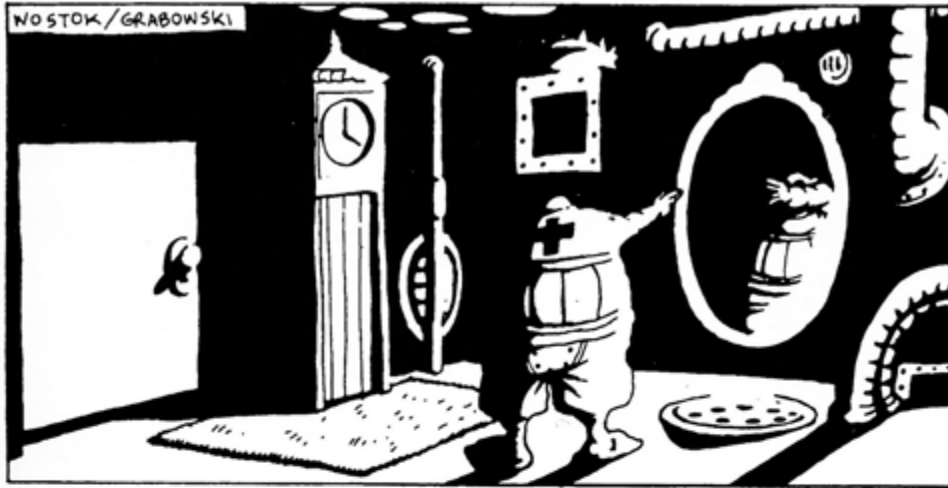
### **Wostok's evocation of Zenitism**

**W**ostok started publishing his fanzine *Krpelj* (The Tick) in the 1990s, when the political, social, economic and cultural systems collapsed and Yugoslavia fell apart in devastating wars. The shift of ideologies from socialism to nationalism reached absurd turns and results, while the economy reeled from the wars; the 1992 United Nations economic sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (at the time consisting of Serbia and Montenegro); and the corruption involved in the privatization of Yugoslavia's national assets which took place under cover of the war throughout the 1990s. A passionate reader conversant with the Mittel-European mode, inspired by alternative culture's freedom and experimentation,<sup>12</sup> Wostok developed his comics production through various formats, together with Grabowski.<sup>13</sup> He also organized workshops with the arts micro-community in Vršac as well as at festivals and youth centers, and established a group with the members of his own family (Tehno Muda), among other activities.

The destruction of the social order in a way inspired and was reflected in the style of the collages, assemblages and combinations of images stripped from their original gloomy context in war propaganda. These works' texts emerged from the "creative rituals" of the micro-communities; the exaggerations and hyperbole used to create banal figures of evil inspired what became key features of his poetics: the figure of the imagined man of the Balkans, and the imagined Balkans in the sharply contrasted light of fire and moon. The widespread misuse by nationalists of medieval epic poetry to mobilize the nation during the 1990s, as well as contemporary political events turned into heroic dodecasyllable recited along with the gusle, a traditional instrument, all formed the background to the wars and privatizations of the era, and inspired a backlash in the multimedia project Tehno Muda. This combined free-form gusle samples, folk music, automatic poetry (recited by the oldest member) and fragments of post-punk music, performed while wearing home-made masks. In his comics, the visual image of the character operating as the mask of Wostok was inspired by the visual traditions of popular films and 19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings, but also enriched with the influence of expressionism and film practices he admired. Moustache, teeth, fire, traditional costumes (from the *Šajkača* national cap to *opanci*, traditional shoes), weapons and animal strength embodied in wolves, appeared as attributes of the supposed barbaric man from the Balkans constructed in the media throughout the world to explain the implosion of a once-peaceful country.

Wostok evoked and revived *Barbarogenije* [Barbarogenius] (Fig.1), a concept developed by Ljubomir Micić in the 1920s. In the circle gathered around the magazine





# FIFTH SCENE

BASED ON MOTIFS FROM THE PLAY "CHRISTMAS AT THE IVANOV'S" BY ALEXANDER VVEDENSKY



Fig. 2. Wostok and Grabowski's "The Fifth Scene."

*Zenit* (published in Zagreb and Belgrade), Micić established Zenitism, a movement closely modeled on the Soviet avant-gardes<sup>14</sup> which sharply critiqued the cultural and social situation in the then-Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and was later censored for “distributing communist propaganda.” In 1926, he described the proletariat as the barbarians: “the idea of the total strength of the proletariat, with the strength of the volcanic lava on the rise, the raw, strong nature elements” (Boynik, 73), still uncorrupted by bourgeois emancipation. Sezgin Boynik warns about the diminution of Zenitism in more recent interpretations, where it is stripped of its clear Marxist-Leninist program and reduced to an arts practice meant to modernize the cultural sphere of Yugoslavia. He adds that more reductive actualizations emphasize only its Balkanism and the Barbarogenius as the counterforce to the European—an imagined subject who can realize balkanization and thus, the liberation of Europe.

In the discourses built around the 1990s wars, the Balkans was presented as the “unconscious of Europe” where primitive urges were let loose in the collapse of civilization, and where the most ferocious crimes were committed by neighbours. “Balkanism,” or the imaginary Balkans of the 1990s, strongly resembled imagery from before the socialist modernization of Yugoslavia. A regression to medieval epic mythology and/or 19th-century nationalism was welcomed by the dominant media in Serbia, supported and developed as a construct by some artists and writers, and successfully launched back into the international marketplace of ideas. Wostok’s intervention attacks the constructed identity built with the cooperation of two subjects of power (the nationalist regimes and the outside world’s colonial gaze), deconstructing it by means of an even more exaggerated figure: the self-aware construct. Thus, the mask of Barbarogenius took over the aesthetic and critical tone of many of his works, playing with the genres of horror films, gothic novels and epic poetry, combining memorial architecture with the monumental aesthetics of Yugoslavia, as well as rural ethnography with elements from the heritage of expressionism and Zenitism. An early example, the comics story “7 Little Eagles, Foxes And More...”<sup>15</sup> combined epic heroes, everyday situations, pop culture and fiction. Drawn by Wostok and based on a script by Nabor Devolac (with whom Wostok often worked), it appeared in *Striper - Strip magazine* No. 1 (November, 1996). Many others like it followed, whether open homages to Micić’s ideas or works, or else pieces which re-read and extended his concepts.

### **The backstage of “The Fifth Scene”**

**I**nspired by the works of the Soviet avant-garde writers from the OBERIU group, Wostok populated their universe with the immediate surroundings of his reality. “The Fifth Scene,” a collaboration between Wostok and Grabovski,<sup>16</sup> consists of seven pages published in *Striper* (edited by Radovan Popović, one of the country’s

nodal points of alternative comics culture) in June, 1997. The script was based on “Christmas at the Ivanovs” by Alexander Vvedensky. It allowed for the immediate recognition of two corresponding realms: the absurdity of the 1990s and the literature of the absurd represented by OBERIU’s texts. Vvedensky wrote the play in 1938, “when the war waged in the Soviet press against the ‘formalists’ and ‘decadents’ was at its height” (Roberts 38). Set in the 1880s, it deals with a nanny who serves a bourgeois family. Irritated by the sexual behaviour of a “child” (a 32-year-old woman) she is caring for, the nanny decapitates her.

In “The Fifth Scene” comic (Fig. 2), the nanny tries to communicate her story of her crime to a doctor at a psychiatric sanatorium. Wostok introduces the doctor in conversation with a mirror, which we find out the doctor himself is imagining. The fantasy world of the committed patients (who pretend to row a boat while hospital employees check on them) and the formal “normality” of the employees visually overlap. The “normality” of the doctor and the employee also dramatically shifts towards hallucinations and the absurd. In this destabilized version of the everyday, the nanny is brought to the doctor to confess her crime and illness. The play, as depicted in the comic, presents the nanny’s logic of illness as the lesser evil, which exonerates her from punishment for the crime, while the doctor avoids any diagnosis. Meanwhile, a two-headed nurse participates in a little theatre of confusion as the nanny tries to get the story straight and proclaims her insanity. The nurse pretends to be the normal nanny, speaking in her voice, answering the doctor’s questions. The play aims to prove that the nanny is healthy-minded, which will result in her capital punishment for the murder (as she tells them). The play continues until the doctor sends her out, and asks her to be replaced by a Christmas tree.

The political context of the comic’s reception is significant to gain a full appreciation of its relevance. At the time it was published, 1998, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia had been concluded by the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995). The political crisis in Kosovo was suppressed from public and media discourses in Serbia, although the future eruption could be anticipated. In the media, there were hundreds of thousands of refugees, veterans from the war Serbia never officially announced, and images of massacres: dismembered bodies, prisoners, children and minefield victims. These filled TV screens and newspapers between the two wars in Serbia<sup>17</sup> (the next one came when NATO bombed Yugoslavia in 1999). None of the wars were officially acknowledged; the process of naming the “events that took place” would imply so many legal consequences, that they functioned as a mask, an empty space, marking time until the choice of a proper name which would fit the current politics. The wars, along with the dramatic inflation and the collapse of social values, affected most of the population and brought them to the state of post-traumatic stress disorder. The period from 1996-7 was an important break from the dominant propaganda of Slobodan Milošević’s regime. Student protests, over 50,000

strong, lasted for several months alongside the protests of opposition parties. Political resistance, alongside the constant articulation of an alternative, spread widely among the younger generations who had to fight for their voice. In the months that followed, *Striper*, together with Low-Fi Video movement activities, was promoted at one cultural centre in Belgrade, KC Rex, which served as the central point of the alternative culture. It operated as an NGO. That small community developed the language of alternative culture to respond to the political situation. As the Low-Fi Video movement tapped the resources of cine-amateurism of Yugoslavia, *Striper* represented comics as the form of fanzine culture that participates in the overall dynamics of alternative culture, fostering links between the public and building an infrastructure for experiments in a variety of fields.

In such a context, Vvedensky's texts would already have validity as a means to evoke a very specific aspect of pre-WWII alternative culture.<sup>18</sup> The second interpretative mode was an identification with the absurd situation of the sanatorium. The doctor who hallucinates the conversation with his image in the mirror and shoots himself from a cannon initiates him into the processes of self-reflection. The groups of people who hallucinate together and the criminal who seeks salvation in diagnosis evokes the basic similarity between the written word and the world of real experience, but the visual components which underline the intersection of these realms as well as the relativity of the "normal" order, its permeability and slippery passage to the other side, add unmistakably to a sense of immediacy in the work. The identification of the nurse with a rug that was shot by the doctor, the two-headed figure of the patriot who feels shots directed to a rug in the hospital "which he holds in his heart," are both inspired by the "monsters" of expressionist cinema<sup>19</sup> and convey the blind faith in propaganda, the willingness to sacrifice for patriotic ideas, which many actually held in 1990s Serbia.

The arrival of the child-killing nanny is announced to the doctor by the nurse; the former anticipates her "heart as black as coal." The conversation that follows can be understood as a deliberate punishment by withholding the diagnosis of madness. The doctor's response to the nanny's "I am sick" is, "You are healthy, you have color in your face. Count to three." The fake answer pronounced by the nurse is a re-enactment of the Soviet show trials ("kangaroo courts"). The path to her capital punishment lies open, while the deliberate diagnosis of madness is denied. Considering the immediate post-war trauma in the Post-Yugoslav societies, a drama of denied escapism into madness is a multi-layered one. The delayed recognition of the "events that took place," and the hope that the madness will deliver an acknowledgment of the consequences, is a paradigmatic story of the war's aftermath, anticipated through a short scene inspired by decades-old Vvedensky text. The destination they send the nanny to is depicted as the bright end of a spiral, usually a symbol of the afterlife, but the banal conclusion erases any pathos: the doctor is relieved the nanny

has left and looks forward to replacing her with a Christmas tree. The cycle of the escapism and continuous carnival which enables the endless deferral of the moment when reality must be faced lies at the heart of the authority which decides on the register of normality. The “schizophrenia” of authority, presented in the opening mirror scene; the multiplication of entities charged with decision-making; the blending of the voices of the subjects under analysis; and growing confusion serve as a persistent mechanism for trauma’s repression, as well as the source of the nightmare and the monstrous manifestation of fears. The picture of the committed patients happily “rowing” an imaginary boat functions as a Greek chorus, proffering the only possibility for happiness, the one in delusion and denial.

“The Fifth Scene” by Wostok and Grabowski was selected for the 2011 anthology *The Invisible Comics - The Alternative Comics in Serbia 1980-2010* due to its paradigmatic value, but also as a leading example of the interdisciplinary osmosis of 1990s alternative culture, which drew on everything from the literary grotesque and cinematic expressionism to the heritage of Soviet literature of the absurd. Its transfiguration into the format of independent and alternative culture made it accessible to a marginalized public and to younger generations otherwise deprived of exposure to those sources. The story was republished in *Beton* magazine in 2012, and is now considered one of the emblematic works in the re-actualization of the resources of literature. Arts and literature journals such as *Reč* from Belgrade (since the 1990s) and *Symposion* from Subotica (since its renewed editions in 2000s) recognized this potential and the significance of the alternative comics scene, and embarked on experiments at the intersection of literature and graphic narrative. The special issue of *Elektrika* (from Pančevo), “The Russian Avant-garde in Comics” (2012), edited by Vladimir Palibrk, demonstrated the extent to which avant-garde literature’s reception has grown and developed among the younger generation of authors from the post-Yugoslav region, as well as in the international context.

## **Institutional performance / The Dream of the Other River Bank**

The power of alternative comics to “reactivate” literature and bring it new audiences also place a role in “The Festival of One Writer” project, organized by the Cultural Center of Belgrade (KCB) in 2012. The writer in focus at the festival was Miroslav Krleža. Four comic artists from Serbia and Croatia—Wostok, Igor Hofbauer, Boris Stanić and Damir Steinfl—were given selected texts inspired by the works and life of Krleža in order to produce an album, published by KCB as the graphic novel *Miroslav’s Gospel*<sup>20</sup> edited by Bora Ćosić.

This project initiated a huge public debate, due to the nationalist community’s resentment of the very notion of paying homage to a writer from Croatia.<sup>21</sup> The institutional performance of the KCB, one of the main cultural institutions in

Belgrade, showed how the over-signification of Yugoslav heritage during the post-Yugoslav transition had led to the absurd denigration of the critical and artistic value of Krleža's work, and how important it was to make this resource available to the generations who did not have his texts in their school curricula. A comics workshop was organized with the participation of Aleksandar Zograf for high school students. The graphic novel offered a new reading, through both the editorial approach of the literary critic and writer Bora Ćosić and that of the artists, who together created a visual language for the complex transliteration of Krleža's style and ideas. Wostok worked together with Sanja Stepanov on the chapters "Belgrade" and "Epilogue," drawing from his own experience of Mittel-European literature and his familiarity with both Krleža's and Ćosić's work. Wostok emphasized how this opportunity reminded him of his neglect of obligatory school texts, which led to him never reading Krleža before, and his later fascination with his work, until the point where he was invited to revive it in this format ("Danilo Milošev: Snolike"). To conclude our discussion of the "case of Krleža," we may also note that in Wostok's opus, even the opposite sides of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century polemics, Micić and Krleža, come together in a new front against the suppression of a common post-Yugoslav cultural history.

Alongside historical revisionism, which intensified during the country's dissolution and its later transition, the political processes of rehabilitation of the fascist collaborators, the revival of defeated ideologies, and the cultural history of Yugoslavia became the field of a two-sided policy: commodification (creating the regional market through "Yugo-nostalgia"), and the suppression of avant-garde art, critical thought and literature which did not fit the new national narratives and canons. Part of the larger processes of "obsessive memorialization"<sup>22</sup> and flexible memorial politics prone to instrumentalization (as seen in the manifestations and projects dedicated to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World War I) (Dimitrijević, 15-19). notions of the arts as emancipatory from the given social framework can be re-activated only through their new and contemporary reading, performance and activation in new social situations. As Gordana Nikolić notes, the legacy of the avant-gardes is organized also as a radical critical narrative directed against the threats of "de-contextualization and re-contextualization, which implies the pacification and relativization of the social role of the avant-garde heritage in the fabrication of the past" (Nikolić, 41).

Wostok, taking part in the process of sustaining and transforming alternative and self-organized culture, persisted in the constant renewal of his own production modes, crossing disciplinary borders. The ability to activate and reclaim resources from the nation's cultural memory and history made his multi-medial experiments a critical part of the revival of alternative, critical and avant-garde thought. The very path of the re-activation, whether through formation of amateur micro-

communities or higher institutional performances in the framework of the cultural policy, connecting amateur video production with a highly-developed political critique re-actualized in the colonial gaze upon the wars in Yugoslavia, Wostok brought to the contemporary understanding of radical amateurism the principle of working outside given frameworks and the intervention into a public sphere otherwise limited by obsolete canons, curricula and conventions. With the collapse of educational and cultural standards, it is this practice which gives the historical avant-gardes new horizons in a region where youth are deprived of their own cultural patrimony. As Boris Buden notes: it is not culture that tells us what the past was like, but that past itself in its presence, actuality, uncertainty and openness, “the past beyond its difference towards the present and future” (Buden, 8).

## Notes

- 1 Danilo Milošev Wostok also participated in the video programs with his video works, produced in cooperation with the microcommunity in his town Vršac, and the correlation between his video, music and comics art practice is very obvious.
- 2 The workshops started as smaller sessions in the kitchen of the Saša Rakezić: Kuhinja, which was the basis for development of a new generation and a scene in Pančevo, a number of initiatives like GRRR! Festival, ElektriKA gallery, etc.
- 3 Beside Wostok’s own fanzines like *Krpelj*, those results of the workshops and sessions can be found in: the journal *Striper* (editor Radovan Popović, 1997-2002, Belgrade), the catalogues of the Yugoslav Cheap Film Festival (JFJF, 1998-2001 Belgrade-Subotica), the XER Comics Festival (1998, Belgrade), *Man From the Well* (a special publication of the *Striper* workshop 1998, Belgrade), *Mutanat* (1999, Belgrade), the *Kuhinja* editions (ed. Saša Rakezić Zograf 1999, 2000, Pančevo), GRRR! International Comics Festival editions (2000-2005, Pančevo), ElektriKA publications (ed. Vladimir Palibrk, Pančevo), Komikaze (ed. Ivana Armanini, Zagreb). Later they were supported by the Novo Doba festival (since 2010).
- 4 One of the best examples is *ROBUSTO!!!* (ed. Danilo Milošev Wostok and Dragana Drobnjak, Lovecraft House, 2016). For more on it see Levin.
- 5 A conflict between the leaders of SFR Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, which resulted in Yugoslavia’s expulsion from the Communist *Information Bureau* (Cominform) in 1948.
- 6 It later received greater international credibility, peaking with the establishment of The Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1969.
- 7 The dilemma involved whether to dismiss artistic practices which did not comply with the premises of socialist realism, suggesting that the affirmation of the dialectic method is the foundation of the emancipatory struggle, although the freedom

- of expression nonetheless exists. Miroslav Krleža established the Lexicography Institute in Zagreb, whose largest project was the Encyclopaedia of Yugoslavia. Today some of their projects are available online. See also their detailed explanation of the context of Krleža's speech at the III Congress of the Union of Writers in 1952, and the history of the Conflict on the Left: <http://krlezijana.lzmk.hr/clanak.aspx?id=1773>.
- 8 Festivals and cultural events such as FEST, BITEF, and April Meetings were established to make the most out of the country's position between the different blocs in Yugoslav cultural diplomacy.
  - 9 See Bojan Jovanović on the process of establishing the new concept of alternative film in Yugoslavia in the 1970s, in *MAFAF – The Invisible History, A View From Belgrade*, ed. Tara Tepavac. Belgrade: CZKD, 2012. 10.
  - 10 Irina Subotic and Vidosava Golubović curated the exhibition “Zenit i avangarda dvadesetih godina” [Zenit and the Avant-Gardes of the Twenties] in the National Museum in Belgrade in 1983.
  - 11 There were many films produced in Yugoslav cinema and cine-amateur clubs, inspired by the ideas and aesthetic experiments of the avant-gardes, but I listed those widely known to various audiences.
  - 12 Initially by the works and life of Marko Breclj, musician and alternative culture pillar in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav societies, based in Slovenia.
  - 13 In 1993 Wostok and Grabović (Boris Grabović) produced the album “Tata je daleko... Moramo ga naći!” [Daddy is so far away ...We must find him!], published by “SLAB-O-CONCRETE” in London, with a preface by US cartoonist Jim Woodring. That proved a big encouragement for the alternative comics scene, which was isolated due to the sanctions and war.
  - 14 With contributions from Malevich, Rodchenko, Arhipenko, Meyerhold, Tairov, Tatlin, Khlebnikhov, Kandinsky, and others; see *Zenit 1921-1926*. Ed. Vida Golubović and Irina Subotić. Belgrade: National Library of Serbia, 2009.
  - 15 Translation mine.
  - 16 AKA Borislav Grabović.
  - 17 For more on the media politics of 1990s Serbia, see *Media Archaeology: The Nineties*, ed. Aleksandra Sekulić. Belgrade: CZKD, 2009.
  - 18 Wostok notes that his favorite book in his childhood was “Doktor Jojboli,” and later he realized that the author, Kornei Chukovsky, was a contemporary and colleague of Danil Kharms. So in retrospect, it was a formative step towards the sensibility he later adopted from the avant-gardes and especially the OBERIU group (Wostok, “How I Became”).
  - 19 Wostok emphasised the influence of Werner Herzog's *The Enigma of Caspar Hauser* (1974), *ibid*.
  - 20 An allusion to the illustrated medieval work “Miroslav's Gospel” (12<sup>th</sup> century), an important part of Serbia's cultural heritage.



- 21 Overviews of these polemics can be read in Saša Ilić. "U ime oca i sinova." *Peščanik*. 21 Aug 2012. Web. <http://pescanik.net/u-ime-oca-i-sinova/> January 20 2018 and Olivera Stošić. "Krleža, Erazmo i prepoltička Srbija." *Politika*. 19 June 2012. Web. <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/222942/Krleža-Erazmo-i-prepoliticka-Srbija>. January 20 2018.
- 22 To paraphrase Buden and Žilnik, the impossibility of anticipation leads to an overaccumulation of the evidence of existence. See Buden and Žilnik's *Uvod u prošlost* [An Introduction to the Past] as well for an analysis of Pierre Nora's concept of *mouvement de la mémoire*.

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The country known for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Czechoslovakia emerged in 1918, with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Western-leaning, with its constitution modeled on the USA's, and situated in the very heart of Europe, the new republic saw itself in the vanguard of modernity. A burgeoning comics culture formed a small part of that forward-looking, cosmopolitan identity.

In 1922, the seminal artist Josef Lada published *Šprýmovné kousky Frantíka Vovíška a kozla Bobeše* [The Pranks of Frantík Vovísek and Bobeš the Goat], one of the first in the country to feature a recurring character. Other significant figures at the 20<sup>th</sup>-century dawn of Czech comics include Ondřej Sekora, with his popular *Pan Břoušek* [Mr. Belly] (1922) in *Lidové noviny*, the leading national newspaper. This serial was followed in 1933 with his even more popular and enduring tales of *Příběhy Ferdy Mravence* [Ferda the Ant], though it also went by other titles.

In competition with “flashier” US imports as well as popular animated films from abroad, Czech artists adapted with the times. In 1938 writer Jaroslav Foglar and artist Jan Fischer created a sensation with *Rychlé šípy* [Fast Arrows], a series of wholesome boys' adventure stories (which became a fixture of Czech popular culture, in several media). Despite bans under the Nazi occupation (1941-1945) and frequent censorship during the Communist era (1948-1967), the *Arrows* soldiered on. In all, the series appeared intermittently from 1938-1941, 1946-1948 and 1967-1971. Comics production as a whole continued throughout the communist era, never completely falling victim to state anti-Westernism, despite periods of greater censure (e.g., 1949-1956).

The 1960s liberal reforms, accelerated in 1968 under First Secretary Alexander Dubček and known as the Prague Spring, cascaded throughout the arts. One figure came to define Czech comics of that era and forever afterward: Karel “Kája” Saudek, whose psychedelic expressionist style in such series as *Muriel a oranžová smrt* [Muriel and the Orange Death] (1969-70, first published 2009), *Honza Hrom* (1968), *Pepík Hipík* (1969) and *Lips Tullian* (1972) injected an erotic, underground comix sensibility into the scene. Yet, despite Saudek's towering position, his career suffered mightily due to censorship, especially after the brutal 1968 suppression of Dubček's reforms by the Warsaw Pact invasion. More staid work for children, such as Jaroslav Němeček's seminal funny animal series *Čtyřlístek* [Four-Leaf Clover] (since 1969), as well as genre material including adventure and sci-fi, represented the medium for most readers in the final stages of communism in Czechoslovakia.

With the death of communism in 1989, similar problems befall the new industry—economic realignment, heavy competition from foreign licensed product, new entertainment possibilities—as in other Soviet bloc countries, though the Czechs' relatively small market exacerbated the turmoil. Shortly after the 1993 “Velvet Divorce,” when Slovakia and the Czech Republic split amicably into two nations, the industry was ailing, near-moribund. Many artists had abandoned comics for more lucrative work, and fantasy/scifi anthology series of chiefly foreign material such as *Crw* (since 1997), typified the scene.

At the turn of the new millennium came renewal: internet sites (such as Komiksarium, 2007) and the fresh talents of what Tomáš Prokůpek dubbed *Generace Nula* [Generation Zero] revived the industry. Many of these creators, such as Filip Novák and Jan Bažant with their *Pán času* [Timemaster], appeared in the pages of the Brno-based *Aargh!* (since 2000), a vital anthology and comics culture journal edited by Prokůpek and Tomáš Kučerovský, as well as in *Zkrat* [Short Circuit], (2004–2006). Slovak Branko Jelinek's *Oskar Ed* (2003–2006) made its mark in this era with his distinctive pen and ink aesthetic, and his surreal stories of psychological trauma. In his chapter, Martin Foret examines how Jelinek posits a uniquely transnational aesthetic with his *Oskar Ed* series, in comparison to other contemporaneous projects with a more Czech cultural frame of reference—prominent among these figure Džian Baban and Vojtěch Mašek's *Monstrkabaret Freda Brunolda uvádí* trilogy (2004–2008) and the tremendously popular *Voleman* (2007–2010) series by Jiří Grus. Martha Kuhlman analyzes Mašek's work from another perspective by considering his evolution as an artist, his references to the avant-garde, and his various collaborations including more documentary works. Yet arguably nothing contributed more to the raising of Czech comics' profile in this period than Jaroslav Rudiš and Jaromír 99's trilogy *Alois Nebel* (2003–2005), from *Labyrint*. This work crystalized the strategy to establish graphic narrative as a bona fide literary form and gain a larger share of the publishing market. By addressing “serious” historical topics and referencing familiar Czech literary tropes, including Bohumil Hrabal's 1965 novel *Ostře sledované vlaky* [Closely Watched Trains], the trilogy was very successful and ultimately adapted into a film (dir. Tomáš Lunák, 2012).

As in a number of post-communist countries, historical topics and nonfiction provided ample material for a new generation of cartoonists. Artist/scriptwriter Mašek, anthropologist Markéta Hajscká, and linguist Máša Bořkovcová are members of *Ašta Šme*, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting cultural diversity through socially engaged media, including comics. With the help of various European grants, this collective has undertaken a number of projects such as *Vyjednávané příběhy* [Negotiated Stories] (2010), a series that recounts the stories of three Roma, and *Nejisté domovy* [Precarious Homes] (2016–2017), a tetralogy about children growing up in foster care or in children's homes. Other influential projects include *Ještě jsme ve válce* [We are Still at War] (2011) (translated into English and published by the University of Chicago Press, 2017), and the nine-volume series *Češi* [The Czechs] (2013–2014), devoted to pivotal moments in Czech history and scripted by Czech historian Pavel Kosatík.

Women have also played a significant role in the development of the medium, beginning most prominently with Lucie Lomová, the Czech comics artist best known abroad given that her graphic novel *Anna chce skočit* [Anna Wants to Jump] (2006), was the first Czech comics work published in France by Actes Sud/L'An 2 Press. Since then, Lomová has continued to be productive, publishing the graphic novels *Divoši* [The Savages] (2011), and *Na odstřel* [Knock 'em Dead], a detective thriller

set in a theater. In the first autobiographical Czech graphic narrative, *Moje kniha Vinnetou* [My Winnetou Book] (2014), Toy\_box, threads together her narrative of a friendship with a squatter-anarchist and her friend's childhood “fan fiction” related to Karl May’s Winnetou stories. The group Laydeez do comics, the Czech chapter of an organization founded in the UK, deals with overtly feminist themes in yearly exhibits as part of the Frame comics festival: *Gender: Redefined* (2016), *Princezny: Šťastně až navěky?* [Princesses: Happily Ever After?] (2017), and *Žena 2.0* [Woman 2.0] (2018).

Comics festivals and comics exhibits are part of an ongoing, evolving comics scene in the Czech context. KomiksFest! (2006-2015), organized by Tomáš Hibi Matějčíček and Joachim Dvořák, director of the press Labyrint, brought an impressive international list of top comics artists to Prague over the years, including Emmanuel Gilbert, Anke Feuchtenberger, Frederik Peeters, and Dave McKean. Following the demise of KomiksFest!, the Frame festival (2017-present), organized by publishers *No ordinary hero* and *Centrala*, and held on the campus of the prestigious Charles University, has rekindled an interest in independent, alternative, and art-oriented comics. Museum exhibits of such well-loved figures as Foglar (2007) and Konečný (2008), as well as the reprinting of many classic communist-era works, consolidated the renaissance of the ‘oos.

Comics scholarship has also exploded, as shown by mammoth histories such as Helena Diesing’s *Kája Saudek* (2009) and *Signály z neznáma: Český komiks 1912–2012* [Signals from the Unknown: Czech Comics 1912–2012] (2012), both from Arbor Vitae press. The latter, edited by Pavel Kořínek and Prokúpek, was the result of a major state-funded grant project, *Komiks: dějiny – teorie 2010–2012* [Comics: History – Theory] comprised of publications, exhibitions and the conference *Studia komiksu, možnosti a perspektivy* [Comics Studies: Potentials and Perspectives], the first of its kind, held at the Palacky University in Olomouc in April, 2011. The project was crowned with the massive two volume *History of Czechoslovak Comics* in 2014, and followed by other important studies, such as *Před komiksem: Formování domácího obrázkového seriálu ve 2. polovine XIX století* [Before Comics: The Formation of the Domestic Picture Story in the Second Half of the XIX Century] 2016. Overall, comics have received a significant amount of attention in the Czech Republic, both in the academy and in the broader public sphere.

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Pavel Kořínek

## Facets of Nostalgia: Text-centric Longing in Comics and Graphic Novels by Pavel Čech

It seems that no nation, no society under Heaven is immune to nostalgia; we Czechs are no exception. We do have our fair share of “golden eras”: the First Republic of 1918-1938 the most prominent among them. In the popular Czech imagination, this “time of our grandmothers, or even great-grandmothers” is linked with the ideas of truth, justice, and the Czechoslovak way. However, more often than not, these “simpler, more righteous times” are reimagined and reinvented in popular culture for mass consumption.

Therefore, one can freely immerse him- or herself in the warm bath of nostalgia, never to emerge again. This indolent drowning, a feeling of being comfortably numb, is reinforced by contemporary documentaries, films, exhibitions and television drama shows such as the soapy *První republika* [The First Republic] with its glorious costumes, melodramatic storylines, and not-so-glorious errors and omissions of all the more problematic aspects of the interwar Czechoslovak experience: national, ethnic and class inequality and the everyday consequences of the early 1930s economic depression among the most obvious. Public perceptions make of the First Republic an idyll, a baseline—or in fact apex—against which to measure all other eras. For the truly committed nostalgists, there even exists a dedicated magazine, *Nostalgie* [Nostalgia]. This monthly, with its affordable price of 16 Czech Crowns, (about 60 euro cents), presents a bonanza of gossip about deceased celebrities, mainly from the 20th Century. As the official promotional text states: “In addition to celebrities, our magazine also offers interesting materials about long-gone places, the fashion of our grandmothers, and advertising from that era. The regular section called ‘Oh these lovely, good old tunes’ will rejuvenate old songs and their history.”<sup>1</sup>

## Various shades of Ostalgie

Scholars have written much on the specifics of nostalgia in the former Eastern Bloc, on the longing for its products, its pop culture—music, movies and television series most prominently—and for the political circumstances of the Communist era. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, we tend to use the term “Yugo-nostalgia,” while the revival of Soviet fashion we dub “Soviet Chic.” The most common term for this particular type of longing, *Ostalgie* (coined from German: Osten [“East”] and Nostalgie [“Nostalgia”]), denotes nostalgia for aspects of life in East Germany, is now widely used to describe similar tendencies around the former Eastern Bloc.

Ostalgie, or Ostalgia, functions as a feeling, a type of yearning, but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon, market niche and—in some cases—a sub-genre. Different ostalgie cultural products share a number of common themes and variations. In the case of ostalgia narratives, we can, for example, observe a distinction between stories that offer revolutionary, transformational catharsis (usually in the depiction of the major events of 1989: the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Velvet Revolution), and those which do not. Most often, the ostalgia narratives also include Bildungsroman-like aspects: the personal growth and coming of age of leading characters appear against the backdrop of political change. The hero becomes an adult at a pivot point of history. The system is failing, but the new, improved, grown-up protagonist prevails—as seen (with small variations) in popular ostalgie movies like *Sonnenallee* [Eastie Boys], Germany, 1999, directed by Leander Haußmann; *Good Bye Lenin!* (Germany, 2003, directed by Wolfgang Becker) and *Pelíšky* [Cosy Dens], Czech Republic, 1999, directed by Jan Hřebejk.<sup>2</sup>

After the revolutions of 1989, many scholars studied the concept of ostalgia, and several, sometimes contradictory, definitions and interpretations proliferated.<sup>3</sup> For purposes of this essay, I take up the approach of Ina Merkel, a professor of cultural studies at Phillips Universität in Marburg. In her work “From Stigma to Cult: Changing Meanings in East German Consumer Culture,” she writes:

Ostalgia takes its pictures, images and symbols, its signs of remembrance, mainly from the field of consumption—as is customary in every wave of nostalgia—but also from political culture. The everyday world of the GDR and the objects people lived with more or less casually received their symbolic character retrospectively. This happened in such a way that people today are able to gain a belated distinction and new admiration. *Ostalgia is, in the first instance, a politics of identity.* [...] The personal past is read in such a way that it allows individuals to orientate themselves in the world according to their specific way of life. *It reflects a yearning for a collective identity, for Heimat, a home and community.* East Germans have not lost Heimat as a place but as a secure orientation.<sup>4</sup>

Just before the split of Czechoslovakia, in the summer months of 1992, Michal Viewegh scored a huge bestseller with his novel *Báječná léta pod psa* [The Wonderful Years of Lousy Living]—the title itself seems to say it all. But perhaps no passage better summarizes the prevalent notion of ostalgia narratives than this proclamation from the end of *Sonnenallee*, written by Thomas Brussig: “Es war einmal ein Land, und ich hab dort gelebt. Wenn man mich fragt wie’s war: ‘Es war die schönste Zeit meines Lebens, denn ich war jung, und ich war verliebt’” [Once there was a land and I lived in it. If someone asks me what it was like, it was the best time of my life, because I was young and in love]. In both these stories, one Czech and one German, the life under Communism is presented as somehow bitter-sweet, political oppressions and dangers of the era being diminished by the “feel-good” atmosphere of everydayness, first loves and joys of simple life.

### The Absence of Overt Autobiography in Czech Comics

Ostalgia (or “retro”), at home in the Czech Republic, manifests in different ways. On the most common level, there we observe an abundance of movies and TV shows about “living wonderfully in lousy times.” Supermarkets offer “retro weeks,” during which customers may buy limited editions of various grocery products in the “original” packaging—including Kofola beverage (Czech socialist rip-off of Coca Cola/Pepsi) as well as various meat products: Prague ham, “Viennese” sausages, “Tourist” salami etc.). We see such phenomena everywhere in the culture; one cannot avoid them. With the exception—peculiarly—of contemporary Czech comics, where ostalgie reminiscence stands out by its glaring absence. In fact, any kind of subjective, personal recollection remains extremely rare. Czech comics seem—at least on their most superficial level—curiously de-personalized, de-subjectivized, with genre and fictional works predominant. For some reason, there have emerged very few overtly personal, autobiographical comics in the Czech tradition.

It seems counter intuitive: numerous scholars consider the comics medium, with its multimodal character and juxtaposition of static visuals and texts, a major vehicle for nostalgia, well-equipped for bridging the mental gap between past and present.<sup>5</sup> As Czech comics historian Michal Jareš argues in his study on the aesthetics of graphic narrative:

Sometimes it happens that we newly encounter comics panels we once enjoyed, that fulfilled our aesthetic expectations, but with the passage of time discover that we have forgotten their ephemeral visual delight. Visual memory, however, is almost instantly restored and we readers are often still capable of summoning surprisingly strong emotional experiences carried over from the past into the present. In the case of comics, the connection between

memory and nostalgia, in comparison to other media, is perhaps stronger. It is comparable to the experience of recollecting favorite old melodies or tunes. In both these cases, aesthetic gratification works in a similar way.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, British comics and communications scholar Elisabeth El Refaie declares in her book *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* that “for many readers, comics are likely to trigger nostalgic memories of their own early reading experiences as children and adolescents.”<sup>7</sup> It goes without saying that comics represent nostalgic objects *par excellence*, as shown by the virtual wave of comics reprints that hit the Czech market in the early 2010s. Comics are “nostalgically” published, advertised, bought, as well as read. We even see nostalgia-infused graphic narrative works.<sup>8</sup>

Expressly nostalgic comics about the author’s own life nonetheless have failed to emerge in large numbers. Whatever the reasons, autobiography (or graphic memoir) does not constitute a major genre in contemporary Czech comics of the 21st Century. This at a time when, throughout Eastern Europe, comics creators are producing autobiographical, personal, oftentimes nostalgic or even ostalgiac comics and graphic novels about growing up under Communism. The Poles, for example, have *Marzi* (2005-2009) by Sylvain Savoia and Marzena Sowa, while the Germans have the acclaimed graphic novel *Kinderland* (2014) by Mawil. In the Czech scene, such works are almost completely absent.

From the early 2000s, Czech comics saw a flood of historical graphic narratives, though these comics and graphic novels tended to focus on historical turning points, monarchs, and luminaries. In Czech shops one may find several comics works about Charles the Fourth (*Karel IV. Pán světa* [Charles the Fourth: The Ruler of the World] by Zdeněk Ležák and Jonáš Ledecký, 2016; *Obrázkové čtení Karel IV.* [Pictorial Stories: Charles the Fourth] by Martin Pitro, Petr Vokáč and Antonín Šplíchal, 2016; *Karel IV. Cesta na císařský trůn* [Charles the Fourth: A Path to the Throne] by Michaela Trnková and Hana Jinderlová, 2016), the exceptional King of the Czech Lands and Holy Roman Emperor from the 14th Century, or about theologian and seminal figure in reformation movement Jan Hus (*Ve jménu Husa* [In the Name of Hus] by Zdeněk Ležák and Michal Kocián, 2015), but close to no personal, memory-based (nostalgic or otherwise) recollections of the last century. Czech historical comics tend toward the educational, didactic, impersonal, de-subjectivized, and—more often than not—quite tedious and dull.<sup>9</sup>

To gain a full understanding of this aberration would require a much longer and more detailed analysis and nuanced interpretation. One would have to consider the situation of comics in the Czech media landscape, the generational characteristics of active Czech comic creators, as well as the inherent mechanics of the Czech comics (and book)<sup>10</sup> publishing market. The modern Czech comics scene is still quite young and small in size; therefore, quite possibly, this lacuna could be nothing more than just a strange coincidence.

Nevertheless, at least one active, prominent and acclaimed contemporary Czech comics artist fills his works with the sort of sensibility we have been discussing. Although not overtly autobiographical, in his material we can rather easily detect a sense of semi-autobiographical nostalgia, Ostalgie, and the wistful yearning for a long-lost Heimat. In this case, however, the Heimat remains a stubbornly elusive idea. Not a country, nor a fixed position in the time-space continuum, it represents merely a subjective notion of childhood, its joys, and fears—and more specifically, a childhood during Communism, spent reading the escapist pages of popular fiction and comics.

### **Pavel Čech and the State-controlled Canon**

**P**avel Čech was born in Brno in that fateful year of 1968, when the political liberation of the Prague Spring forcibly came to an end through the military intervention and invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies. He still lives and works in Brno today. He trained as a mechanical locksmith, but his love of art, comics, and illustration prevailed. In 1990, he self-published his first comic book *Dobrodružství Honzy Štístka* [The Adventures of Johnny Luck], and four years later had his first solo exhibition. Since 2000, his artistic oeuvre has taken a new direction, focusing simultaneously on comics and picture-books. In both these areas he is widely acclaimed a modern master, and has won several awards for his comic book projects and picture-books. Čech's most ambitious graphic novel, the 200-page *Velké dobrodružství Pepíka Střechy* [2012, The Great Adventure of Pepík Střecha] earned the prestigious Magnesia Litera Award (in the children's book category) in 2013. He has held more than twenty individual exhibitions, with picture-books translated into English, French, Italian, Croatian, Russian and Slovenian, and graphic novels published in Italy, Romania and Ukraine.

A great admirer of traditional adventure stories and illustrations, a life-long member of the Woodcraft League and father of two sons, Čech fills his works, usually employing watercolor and ink on paper, but occasionally experimenting with pencil drawing, collage and gauche as well, with nostalgic undertones and the ephemeral beauty of a poetic “everydayness.” His illustrations and books resonate with his love for North American Indians, coming-of-age stories still vividly remembered, and days of childhood innocence. His timeless stories tend to depict young protagonists, usually a boy (for Pavel Čech's fictional worlds of “memory awakened through comics” are strongly gendered, formulated with the dominant perspective of boys and young men), who have to overcome various obstacles on a spiritual journey to become better, more “complete” adults. Older men also quite frequently appear in Čech's narratives, though these elders almost always behave like “youngsters in old bodies” as they reminisce about the long-past days of the Spring of their lives. Often, the old

genre texts of popular culture—kids' adventure novels, famous Czech comics and so on—play some important role in the story. This chapter will focus on the artist's recurring Ostalgic theme, marked by allusions to popular genre works and fond images of the past.

In Čech's art, the books and comics he read (or wanted to) as a child reemerge and gain new and surprising meanings. His picture books and graphic novels contain many intertextual allusions to the canonical tomes of the adventure genre: works by Jaroslav Foglar, Jules Verne, Karl May and Ernest Thompson Seton are all here, petrified in the timeless continuum of the adventure canon of children literature. The intradiegetic depiction of these canonical stories serves several functions: Čech employs adventure books and comics as props in the narrative, but their presence also signals to an implied audience due to these texts' immediate recognizability to virtually anyone who grew up in Communist-era Czechoslovakia.<sup>11</sup> The references constitute a shared canon, or—in Merkel's term—a "collective pop cultural identity": a Heimat, of sorts.

People without first-hand experience of growing up under Communism may very well not realize one of the lesser-known aspects of that obsolete era: the fact that every kid who read was reading essentially the same titles. With options limited, some of these restricted texts achieved cult status (for example, *Rychlé šípy* [Fast Arrows], 1938, by Jaroslav Foglar and Jan Fischer), while approved classics were widely disseminated. In other words, the genre canon of kids' adventure literature was quite small but ubiquitous. The overall selection of available materials was determined by state institutions that decided what was promoted, what was offered, and what was banned. When asked how he felt—as a child growing up in the 1970s and 1980s—when he learned that books and comics by Foglar were banned, Čech responded:

It is difficult for me to explain it after so many years. I was simply confused and we didn't discuss this at home. Somehow, I suspected, that the boys from Foglar's books weren't members of the Pioneer organization and that somebody didn't like that and that was the reason why the books were banned. Nevertheless, I would always search for them in secondhand bookshops. It's almost sad, how much time I spent by the shelves of children's literature. And I would finally buy something else because I never found any of Foglar's books.<sup>12</sup>

When creating intertextual references, Čech draws from this internalized canon, which shaped and delimited his childhood reading experience. Repeatedly, he fills his comics pages with recollections of what he actually read (Ernest Thompson Seton, Alexandre Dumas, Karl May) and what he yearned for and longed to read (Foglar). Though such intertextual reconnection, he performs a nostalgic act. When Čech reminisces about his childhood, he recalls books and comics he read and loved as a kid, as well as books he sought in the aisles of second-hand bookstores. His nostalgia, his



Fig. 1. Pavel Čech's *Velké dobrodružství Pepíka Střechy*

text-centric longing, is not overtly ideological—it is not Ostalgie in its original sense—but it is nevertheless deeply rooted in the political reality of the Normalization-era Czechoslovakia.<sup>13</sup>

Čech's picture book *Velká knižní záhada* [2014, *The Great Book Mystery*] functions as a simple cat-and-mouse story, similar to all such legendary tales from the rich history of global animation as well as comics tradition, but this time, the pursuits of the animal antagonists take place within canonical texts, with the original illustrations, page layouts and comic episodes in the background. In this imaginary library, the book illustrations migrate, leaving our protagonists free to roam the pages of the transformed volumes. Mirek Dušín, the iconic hero of the most famous Czech comics series of all, *Rychlé šípy*, joins the Three Musketeers (with the famous illustrations by Maurice Leloir), while on the next page, the eternal chase takes place directly atop the pages of actual *Rychlé šípy* comics. The pictorial background of the imaginary library offers a key to interpretation—one can easily interconnect the idea of an imaginary library with the visual manifestation of an artist's mind, with its nostalgic notions about the literary canon and children's adventure fiction.

Often, reading or re-reading adventure classics also serves as the first step towards the adventure, as in Čech's intradiegetically crafted short story "Ostrov pokladů" [Treasure Island], named after the 1883 novel by Robert Louis Stevenson. Čech usually makes his protagonists bookwormy loners who seek refuge in the comforting arms of





Fig. 2. Pavel Čech's *Velké dobrodružství Pepíka Střechy*.

classical adventure literature and comics. We need not speculate on the relevance of this gesture to the artist's autobiography. Much more interesting: the reasons for his selection of particular texts, and of their narrative function within the stories. This text-related nostalgia, a text-centric longing, represents the most interesting aspect of Čech's works because it tells us much about the perceived role and function of adventure reading. Adventure books and comics appear here as safe-havens, escapist paradises. In Čech's nostalgic fictional universe, to read and to share your reading experience means to interact with your peers. To read adventure novels and comics means to experience self-fulfillment through interaction with a (classical, yet living) text. Above-mentioned gendered nature of Pavel Čech works applies here: his shared literary canon is in fact an adventure canon, a corpus of texts perceived as / aimed at (dominantly young male readers).

### **Pepík Střecha's love for books**

In the graphic novel *Velké dobrodružství Pepíka Střechy*, the subject of the illustrated adventure novel plays a crucial part. Pepík is a shy lonesome boy; he stutters and has no friends other than the adventure novels he loves to read, though his classmates viciously mock and ridicule him for his introversion and bookworm nature. As seen in Figure 1, the graphic novel is narrated in the first person (presented unboxed in

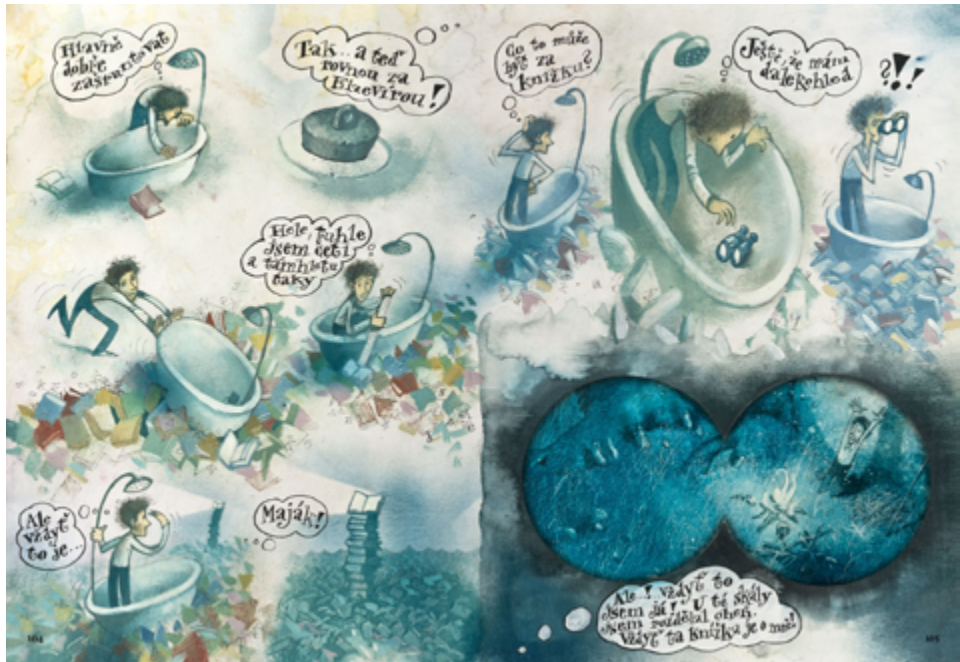


Fig. 3. Pavel Čech's *Velké dobrodružství Pepíka Střechy*.

typeface), which adds another layer to the hand-written dialogues in speech balloons: “I liked to go the public library, where there was peace and quiet, yet still plenty of stories, struggles and adventures ...”<sup>14</sup> After a visit to the library, Pepík is sitting with a cup of tea and immersing himself in a book. The ship in the background respects neither panel borders nor the pages of the depicted book. It has sailed out of the library book, bound for adventure, as Pepík’s imagination takes off.

When Pepík finally befriends someone, it happens through these books. Elzevíra, a new student in his class, is also fascinated by the plot of the library novel, and they read it together. It may seem like a happy ending, but we still have not made it past the beginning of the story. After a few peaceful weeks of friendship, filled with literary discussions, strolls and expeditions on ice-skates, Elzevíra disappears. When he finds a “save me” message in a bottle, Pepík learns that she is in danger. But what should he do? Čech brilliantly represents his deliberations in the two subsequent pages, from the middle of the graphic novel (Fig. 2). On top of the left page, we see an astonished Pepík as he reads Elzevíra’s cry for help. The bottom of the page, seamlessly connected to its top by the background watercolor through a “spilling” effect, shows Pepík at his table, studying the message carefully. The narration reads: “I don’t know how I reached home. It was like I was in a dream. I read the note over and over, maybe a hundred times. It was her handwriting.” This skillful “mirrored” scene repetition recalls the earlier, more tranquil moment from the beginning of the graphic novel: Pepík is once more sitting at his table, reading

something—but this time, his reading offers no opportunity for safe, passive escape. This time, it calls him to action.

As with its counterpart, the page on the right is also compositionally divided into two parts: upper and lower. While on the left page this division signals the flow of time (so a reader may infer that Pepík returned home after finding the note), here it bears a much more metaphorical meaning, with collaged popular culture characters hovering above Pepík's head. The splitting of the page reflects Pepík's deliberations of what to do next; it visualizes and emphasizes his thought process. Standing in front of his personal bookshelf, at a loss as to what to do, the characters from comics and novels call him to action. "Save Elzevíra!" shouts the speech-balloon ascribed to an imagined collective of pop culture icons: Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, May's Winnetou, Tolkien's Gandalf, and Foglar and Fischer's *Rychlé šípy*, among others. "I reached my decision in front of the bookshelf," states the narrator. In this scene, the role of adventure reading changes for the first time: no longer a device of (passive) escapism, it has transformed into an incentive to action.<sup>15</sup> Pepík's lyrical, adventurous voyage to save Elzevíra begins.

Retracing the steps of their earlier strolls, Pepík finds himself in a wooden washtub, serving as a small boat, being carried away by the flow of a mysterious underground river that floats through silenced halls. Equipped with a flashlight and a strange timepiece he received from the old eccentric (who seems to know more than he says), he must navigate through the stormy sea and reach an unknown island. Here—after saving himself using the techniques learned from the adventure books (so he knows how to acquire food and start a fire)—he continues searching for his lost friend. During the night, he witnesses a struggle to the death between the creature of time (depicted here as a demon with clock-dial eyes) and the protagonist of the novel he read with Elzevíra. The pop-culture hero fights for childhood, for innocence, for inactivity, but there is no way back. After warning Pepík to run, the hero dies. Pepík must overcome his fear and overcome his stutter to survive, and finally reach adulthood. And this growing up means he must find a way to outgrow his readerly passivity. Sitting on a cliff, tormented by rainfall, Pepík thinks: "So maybe this is what real adventure looks like. It's a different experience from what you read in a book."

In the following dream sequence (Fig. 3), the ocean transforms into a sea of books, pages ferociously flipping. A book-lighthouse beckons on the horizon, but—quoting Pepík's first line on the spread's right page—"Which book could it be?" On the bottom of his boat (this time an enamel bathtub), he finds binoculars and learns that the book, in fact, tells the story of his life (here, Čech is cleverly re-presenting the earlier scene from Pepík's arrival on the island). Pepík decides to reach the lighthouse, so he can read about how his voyage develops. He wants to read about his own life, but that is not—cannot—be enough. He must live it through.

At the end of the journey, Pepík finds a forsaken little house in a garden. He does not know it yet, but his experiences have cured him of his apathy—a change signaled on the visual level: muted colors of grey, blue, and green that dominated the previous pages here give way to bright colors overflowing with radiant gold. “Sunbeams scrambled through the treetops and covered the forest in the strange amber light. Buzzing flies everywhere, birds singing in the bushes,” states the narrator. Guided by the “rescued” Elzevíra, his classmate and maybe, just maybe, also his first love, he fulfills his destiny. But the flow of time is merciless, and the last rendezvous with Elzevíra is speeding toward its end. Pepík walks through a small gate in the wall, leaving the world of imagination, but Elzevíra cannot follow him there. To grow up, he has to accept her imaginary essence. He must let her go. As in adventure novels, imaginary friends become a beloved relic of the past, something one must let go in order to grow up and reach adulthood. This brilliantly realized metatextual graphic novel, very much a double-edged sword, is both a text-centric reminiscence of long-lost popular culture, as well as a nostalgic coming-of-age story about the necessity of letting childhood—along with its novels and comics—go.

Čech creates a strange and distanced space of nostalgia for childhood, by obsessively inserting texts from the adventure narratives canon into his stories, as well as from the shared limited canon of Normalization-era Czechoslovak popular culture. His carefully-selected allusions, along with the intertextual net he weaves, have no rival in the affectual power they carry, especially for his generation of readers. We may interpret his text-centric longing as a yearning for the long-lost homeland of his childhood reading. In the story of Pepík Střecha, this text-centric longing becomes the major topic and key metaphor of the narrative. Throughout the decades of the Communist era, children’s popular culture changed very little and the key references remained the same; it is contemporary Czech consumers who have grown used to much more rapid changes in pop culture. Čech’s turn to the past may reflect a real longing for stability, for the reassurances of canon, for the Heimat of enduring, reliable popular culture—the ideologically-charged pop culture he lived within when young and in love.

With these allusions, Čech indirectly refers to the shared experience of Normalization-era kids (and to those in neighboring countries such as GDR and Poland as well). Children’s popular culture in its tamed, controlled version offered an opportunity to escape to somewhere else, to the special remoteness of the Wild West, where one could play cowboys and Indians, and imitate the blood-brotherhood of Old Shatterhand and Winnetou from Karl May’s novels. Readers were replaying only the stories they knew, stories pre-selected, considered, and allowed (or banned) by someone else. It would not be taking our interpretation too far to say that this passive subordination to someone else’s pre-selected “canon” had to be overcome with an “active” act of revolt on the personal, as well as on the socio-political level.

In an earlier Čech graphic novel, *Tajemství ostrova za prkennou ohradou* (2009), [The Secret of the Island Behind the Wooden Fence], the protagonists avidly read Ernest Thompson Seton's *Two Little Savages* and decide to reenact what they've learned about the life of Native Americans. They build a teepee and "become Indians." In *Kinderland*, Mawil's characters are similarly so thrilled by the screening of the *Winnetou* feature film, that they decide to reenact a ritual to become blood brothers. On the surface, these comics may seem to have little in common, but underneath flows a strong connection. Czech comics may not have overtly nostalgic or ostalgie narratives, and it may be largely missing its autobiographical stories. But through the text-centric longing so prominently present in Pavel Čech's stories, it seeks to touch by other means the same lost world of childhood.

## Notes

- 1 As stated on the journal's publisher Bauer Media website: <http://www.bauermedia.cz/nostalgie>. Accessed 12 February 2018.
- 2 For a discussion on ostalgie claim of *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee* see Gareth Dale, "Heimat, 'Ostalgie' and the Stasi: The GDR in German cinema, 1999-2006" *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15:2 (2007) 155-175; Roger F. Cook, "Good Bye, Lenin! : Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism" *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 43:2 (2007) 206-219; and Paul Cooke, "Performing Ostalgie: Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee*" *German Life and Letters* 56:2 (2003) 156-167. Ostalgie tendencies in Czech popular culture (with discussion on Pelíšky) are analyzed by Jaroslav Pinkas in his 2016 PhD dissertation *Vzpomínání na tzv. normalizaci v popkultuře a způsoby jeho didaktického využití* ([https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/1195/IPTX\\_2010\\_1\\_11210\\_0\\_314778\\_0\\_104759.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/1195/IPTX_2010_1_11210_0_314778_0_104759.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), accessed 20 June 2018).
- 3 For a general overview of Ostalgie see f. e. books by Katja Neller: *DDR-Nostalgie: Dimensionen der Orientierungen der Ostdeutschen gegenüber der ehemaligen DDR, ihre Ursachen und politischen Konnotationen* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006) and Thomas Ahbe: *Ostalgie: Zum Umgang mit der DDR-Vergangenheit in den 1990er Jahren* (Thüringen: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2005) and *Ostalgie. Zu ostdeutschen Erfahrungen und Reaktionen nach dem Umbruch* (Thüringen: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2016). For nation-centred approaches to Ostalgie and its connections with the general nostalgia see Dominic Boyer, "Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany" *Public Culture* 18:2 (2012) 361-381. For consideration of pop-cultural nostalgia in contrast to elite (intellectual) depictions of the foregone era see Irena Reifová: "The Pleasure of Continuity: Re-reading post-socialist nostalgia" *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (Nov

- 15, 2017): <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1367877917741693>. Accessed 12 February 2018.
- 4 Ina Merkel: “From Stigma to Cult: Changing Meanings in East German Consumer Culture” in *The Making of the Consumer. Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*. Ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford - New York: Berg, 2006), 249-270; emphasis in italics - PK.
  - 5 For detailed and nuanced discussions on memory, autobiography, and comics, see f.e. Elisabeth El Refaie: *Autobiographical Comics. Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), Hillary Chute: *Graphic Women: Life, Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Jared Gardner: “Autography’s Biography, 1972-2007” (*Biography* 31:1, 2008, 1-26) and Charles Hatfield: *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi).
  - 6 Michal Jareš: “Tu ‘krásu’ nelze popsat slovy. Estetické souřadnice komiksu”. In Pavel Kořínek - Martin Foret - Michal Jareš. *V panelech a bublinách. Kapitoly z teorie komiksu* (Praha: Akropolis, 2015), 98-99.
  - 7 Elisabeth El Refaie: *Autobiographical Comics. Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 130. Here she is referencing the work of Dale Jacobs and Gillian Whitlock.
  - 8 As for the evidence of nostalgia-infused authorial strategies, one can f. e. interpret the prevalence of captioned didactic material in contemporary comics. During the socialist era, it was sometimes considered more safe to present a “tamed” version of comics, without speech-balloons but instead with text beneath the panels (speech balloons being traditionally criticized in the Czech context as a harmful and “foreign” element). This was the case of the enormously popular series *Obrázková kronika českých dějin* (Pictorial Chronicle of Czech History) which debuted in 1970 as a caption-style comics series in a children’s magazine *Mateřídouška* (Thyme) before it was collected a decade later in a volume called *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* (Pictures from the Czech History and Legends). The popularity and influence of these comics (and their subsequent reprints) was—and remains—so enormous, that the rather idiosyncratic, “forma” type of captioned comics series keeps getting re-lived even in the present day. Authorial nostalgia is here active on the most fundamental level, in the selection of overall formal characteristics. For a more detailed description of this formal variant of comics, see the relevant chapters in Tomáš Prokůpek - Pavel Kořínek - Martin Foret - Michal Jareš: *Dějiny československého komiksu 20. století* (Praha: Akropolis, 2014), 521-522, 628-629. I briefly discuss an interpretation of this format and its self-censoring properties in Pavel Kořínek: “Che cosa fa parte della storia? Le trasformazioni dei popolari Obrázky z českých dějin / Co patří do historie: Transformace populárních Obrázků z českých dějin”, in *La memoria a fumetti. Studi sul fumetto, la storia e la memoria / Paměť v bublinách. Studie o komiksu, paměti a*

- dějínách*. Eds. Tiziana D'Amico - Petr A. Bílek - Ludmila Machátová - Martin Foret (Mantova: Universitas Studiorum, 2016), 91-104, 229-241.
- 9 For discussion of these Czech historical comics see Petr A. Bílek: "Il fumetto ceco contemporaneo come diagramma storico: modalità della creazione dell'immagine del passato attraverso il medium 'dell'arte sequenziale' / Současný komiks jako historiogram: Způsoby vytváření obrazu minulosti médiem 'sekvenčního umění'" in *La memoria a fumetti. Studi sul fumetto, la storia e la memoria / Paměť v bublinách. Studie o komiksu, paměti a dějinách*. Eds. Tiziana D'Amico - Petr A. Bílek - Ludmila Machátová - Martin Foret (Mantova: Universitas Studiorum, 2016), 45-70, 187-210.
  - 10 Books (hard bound and paperback) or BD-style albums are the most common publication formats of 21st century Czech Comics. There exists almost no serial (f. e. magazine) publication platform for the presentation of long-form comic art. Therefore, contemporary comics in the Czech Republic are more closely connected to the book culture and market than, for example in the US or Japan.
  - 11 According to one reviewer, this may quite possibly constitute a problem for contemporary young readers: "I really am not sure, whether nowadays, when the school kids do not tend to read as much and have many other interests, this fragile romance is still intelligible to them. It may, on the other hand, strongly impress their parents, who thanks to this story return once again, even if just for a moment, to the times when they read Foglar's or May's novels, Batlička's short stories and various pulps. These books, read hidden under the school desk, were directly inviting them to set out for adventure, to take off on a voyage to the unknown. In short, I'm simply not sure whether this story fits into the contemporary world and whether it may have any appeal for younger readers, even though they are its intended audience." See Roman Bílek: "Velké dobrodružství Pavla Čecha" *XB-1* (Nov 22, 2012): <http://www.casopisxb1.cz/aktuality/velke-dobrodruzstvi-pavla-cecha-recenze/>. Accessed 19 February 2018.
  - 12 Interview with Pavel Čech, published in the monograph *Zoom 2: Pavel Čech*, ed. Tomáš Prokůpek (Brno: Anaphabet Books, 2013), 4.
  - 13 For Svetlana Boym, the author of the influential treatise on subject called *The Future of Nostalgia*, there are two basic types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance." Svetlana Boym, *Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41. Pavel Čech's oeuvre would be situated in the area of the latter type—or tendency, since Boym herself regards her proposed dichotomy not as absolute types but as tendencies, "ways of giving shape and meaning to longing" (dtto, 41).
  - 14 On the stylistic level, these incursions of the first-person narrator are different from the prevailing tone of the graphic novel: employing a much richer, metaphorical

and poetic repertoire, these captions project the notion of a much older, wiser and experienced Pepík (perhaps of advanced years).

- 15 Worth noting in this context: the small characters in the bottom right of the page present a contradictory message. “Go nowhere,” reads the speech balloon attributed to the two figures: Dlouhé bidlo and Bohouš. To understand this moment, the reader must know these characters; they are in fact the antagonists of the *Rychlé šípy*, two rotten boys who always seek to cause harm to the virtuous ideals of the titular boy club. Here, they represent “the bad ones” (i.e., bad thoughts).

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# Martha Kuhlman

## The Avant-Garde Aesthetic of Vojtěch Mašek

Vojtěch Mašek is one of the most experimental comics artists, both in terms of his stylistic expression and his range of cultural references, to emerge from the “Generation Zero” (post-2000) Czech comics scene. A graduate of the prestigious Prague film school FAMU, Mašek did not come to the medium from the Czech comics tradition. But his trilogy, *Monstrkabaret Freda Brunolda uvádí* [Fred Brunold’s Monster-Cabaret presents] (2004-2008), coauthored with Džian Baban, created a sensation for its dark, unconventional collage style and entangled plotlines. His work has expanded intermedially to encompass related films, theatrical productions, and further comics projects (Foret 306). Building upon the success of the first book, *Sloni v Marienbadu* [Elephants in Marienbad] (2004), a sly reference to the French film *L’année dernier à Marienbad* [Last Year in Marienbad] and the protagonist’s trunk-like nose, the authors staged performances of Fred Brunold’s Cabaret at Prague’s Nablízko theater.<sup>1</sup> One of the subplots of the original story, *Hovory z Rezidence Schlechtfreund* [Conversations from the Residence of Hermann Schlechtfreund] (2005), was turned into a comic strip and then adapted for theater as *JožkaLipnikjehožičlověkaneumílhát* [JozkaLipnikisasaintandcannotlie], and *Pandemonium aneb dějiny sousedství* [Pandemonium, or, the History of the neighborhood] (2008), features some of the same characters in the original trilogy. Mašek and Baban won five Muriel prizes in Prague’s international Komiksfest—two for *Hovory z Rezidence Schlechtfreund* in 2007 and 2008, one for the script of the second book in the series, *Za vším hledej doktora Ženu* [Cherchez Dr. Ženu] (2007), as well as two additional prizes in 2009 for *Poslední chobotango* [The Last Trunktango], the third book in the trilogy, and *Pandemonium*.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to his fantastical and satirical stories, Mašek has explored non-fiction narratives on documentary subjects addressing social or historical issues in collaboration with other artists, historians, and anthropologists. As part of *Ašta Šmé*, a group of social scientists and artists who produce documentary comics about

minorities, cultural identity, and social inequality, he was the artist and scriptwriter for the non-fiction trilogy *O přibjehi* [Stories] (2010). With anthropologists Markéta Hajská and Máša Bořkovcová, Mašek produced graphic narratives—*Albína, Keva* and *Ferho* (2010)—that recount the experiences of Roma struggling to get by in the contemporary Czech Republic where they face significant barriers of discrimination (Alaniz). Mašek also ventured into historical fiction, creating the artwork to accompany historian Pavel Kosatík’s script for the graphic narrative *1952: Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského* [1952: How Gottwald Murdered Slánský], (2014), which concerns the dramatic betrayals and injustices of the Stalinist show trials. Continuing his work with *Ašta Šmé*, he wrote the script for a biography of a Roma boy titled *Silnější než někdo* [Stronger than Anyone] (2015), with art by Marek Pokorný, for another series, *Nejisté domovy* [Precarious Homes]. In collaboration with Marek Šindelka, he co-wrote the script for *Svatá Barbora* [Saint Barbara] (2018), about the strange child abuse scandal involving a young woman named Barbara Škrlová that erupted in the town of Kuřim in 2007.<sup>3</sup> There is a considerable self-reflexive component in these non-fiction works as Mašek represents himself in conversation with the protagonists of the stories and often alludes to the constructed nature of the narrative.

Whether working with fiction or in a more documentary vein, however, what makes Mašek’s work unusual is the way that he revives and recuperates an avant-garde sensibility in his graphic narrative. As this overview of his comics production amply demonstrates, Mašek is drawn to stories about monstrosity—whether figurative, like Fred Brunold’s “melancholic freakshow” (Foret), or literal, in the case of mistreated minorities and dark episodes in Czech history. This fascination with cruelty and the absurd is expressed through his use of repetition, reframing, collage, and unconventional page layouts, all of which renders his work highly unusual and experimental. For the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in how he develops his avant-garde aesthetic in the *Monster Cabaret* series, which is primarily fictional but reflects historical realities, and compare this to his later work *1952: Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského*, (2014), which is historical in focus but elaborated with fictional details.

## The Melancholic Freakshow

From the beginning, *Sloni v Marienbadu*, the first book in the *Monster Cabaret* series, is profoundly influenced by the works of Franz Kafka. The story concerns the absurd and tragic fate of the main character Damian Trunk (Chobot), an office worker in the tradition of Kafkaesque bureaucrats who is abducted and undergoes an operation at the hands of Dr. Žena, the acolyte of the Russian surgeon General Trunkov (Chobotov). A great deal of wordplay and absurd twists of fate are woven into a complex, multilayered story in which Damian, with his nose surgically extended into a “trunk,” plays the role of the antihero who must save the world from the evil

Trunkov. Fred Brunold's *Monster Cabaret* frames this story, inviting spectators to watch the Damian sections in tandem with other subplots presented as separate acts. Another subplot—or “act”—within this performance is a series of conversations between Hermann Schlechtfreund [“bad friend” in German], an obstreperous editor, and the aspiring yet obsequious writer, Jožef Lipnik. The homage to Kafka is centrally placed in a series of exchanges titled *Metamorphosis I, II, III, and IV*. When Lipnik brings Schlechtfreund his work, the grumpy editor suggests that he begin his story with the opening sentence of *Metamorphosis*. It is deliberately left unclear whether he is playing with Lipnik or just being obtuse; as readers, we are, in effect, in Lipnik's position.

Mašek and Baban's references extend beyond Kafka, however—a knowledgeable reader will notice that the text is replete with literary and artistic allusions. Because Mašek is working with old photographs and film stills, some of them from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the atmosphere of the story harkens back to the historical avant-gardes—Surrealism and Dada most prominently. Commenting on Fred Brunold's antics on stage, one of the audience members remarks, “Cute Dada!” Schlechtfreund, who is described as a former member of a Surrealist group, brags that he wrote the forward to André Breton's *Nadja*, and attempts to pass off an old essay he wrote for a book about Salvador Dali to his protégé Lipnik as the foreword to his book. In a more general sense, Mašek's dark aesthetic, which combines humans and animals into strange hybrid forms, is indebted to Czech Surrealist Jan Švankmajer's animated films. Švankmajer's representation of individuals as infinitely pliable claymation characters, as in *Možnosti dialogu* [Dimensions of Dialog] (1982), resonates in the surgical procedure of “trunkification,” where people's noses are pulled and extended into ridiculous trunks. The *Monster Cabaret* series also contains an echo of the darkly surreal films of David Lynch, director of the *Elephant Man* (1980), whom Mašek acknowledges as a formative influence, along with Czech new wave directors such as Pavel Juráček and Jan Němec.<sup>4</sup>

Another experimental aspect of *Monster Cabaret* is how the authors manipulate levels of fiction and reality within their imaginary story world, and seek to involve the reader through self-referential gestures. At the beginning of *Sloni v marienbadu*, the director informs the audience that they may participate in the performance by entering in a contest for the best story at the end of the show. An audience member named Josef Huber comes forward towards the end of the book, and recounts a rather obscure short story by Arthur Schnitzler titled *Ich* [I].<sup>5</sup> Huber, also the main character of Schnitzler's story, is a comfortable, bourgeois father and businessman, but his grasp on reality begins to slip when he takes a walk in the park and notices an innocuous sign that somehow triggers a mental breakdown, and he begins to think that words do not correspond to the objects they designate. It's as if the signifier has come loose from the signified, precipitating the main character's identity crisis—a theme that



**Fig. 1.** The authors satirize the citizen induction ceremony in *Sloni v Marienbadu*. © Mašek and Baban 2004.

fits with the Damian trunk story of metamorphosis as well. This notion is taken to yet another level when Brunold, at the close of the story, mocks the audience and tells them that they are nothing but imaginary characters in a picture book, much to their chagrin, “My všichni jsme jenom ...vymyšlený postavičky” [We are all just...fictional characters]. At every turn, Baban and Mašek play with readers, undermining their assumptions and switching between levels of fiction and reality.

## History and Metaphor

Despite the avant-garde references, the trilogy is set in the 1990s, and manages to satirize both the communist and post-communist period. At the beginning of the first book, the hapless Damian is taken to a movie theater and forced to watch newsreels from the 1950s that laud agricultural harvests and social progress, which gradually segues into propaganda for the merits of “trunkification.” In a sly gesture of détournement, Mašek alters a photo of a smiling mother and her baby with hand-drawn trunks, which bears the following caption, satirically referencing the citizen induction ceremonies that replaced baptisms during the communist era, “Tato maminka dobře ví, co je pro jejího malého občánka nejdůležitější!” [This mother knows well what’s best for her little citizen] (Fig. 1).

But when the propaganda film insists that “trunkification” is necessary for progress on both sides of the Iron Curtain, Damian objects, “For god’s sake, what Iron Curtain? Didn’t it already fall?” Even so, the monstrous transformation of

Damian into an elephant-man resembles a surreal extended metaphor for cold-war paranoia and life under communism. The authors didn't intend the book to be a parodic glance at Czech history, but Mašek concedes that there is something to this interpretation, explaining that "we were born during normalization and we remember the end of communism. We have memories in common. As kids we noticed that there was something strange...[there were] these characters that we half feared and half ridiculed."<sup>6</sup> Mašek conveys this sense of the uncanny and the grotesque throughout the comic by altering black and white photographs with his own surreal paintings and drawings.

The post-communist period is not presented as the sunny road to progress, either. In the third volume, *Poslední chobotango* [The Last Trunktango] the utterly bland smiley-faced Jan Štulec, a credulous twenty-year old economics major, becomes the tool of General Trunkov in his scheme to annihilate the world by silencing it. Štulec, the founder of the company Idejedlík 90 [idea-eater], gives seminars on how to "eat ideas," and thus gain control over other people. By posing Štulec with Václav Klaus, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic in the 1990s, Baban and Mašek's work can be understood as implicitly critical of the free market policies that preached business as the solution to the nation's problems. They also subvert the reader's expectations regarding monstrosity, since Damian's accursed trunk becomes the weapon that ultimately defeats his nemesis General Trunkov. As Baban states, [Damian] is "kind of an anti-superhero compared to the American comic book tradition...[an] Eastern Bloc superhero, [since] his trunk has 'super powers.'" Freaks, misfits and "monsters"—Fred Brunold's ragtag company—are sympathetic characters in the story. And Damian's wife Olga, who comes to save him in the end, voluntarily undergoes surgery to get her own trunk in order to resemble her beloved husband. Their story closes with Damian and his wife fleeing to Scandinavia, where they start a family and run an organic farm, while Štulec's blank face hangs ominously over Prague. Whether this is a "happy ending" or a more pessimistic one remains deliberately open-ended, allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.<sup>7</sup>

### **From Monster Cabaret to the Monstrous Trials of the 1950s**

**I**n his essay "Somewhere behind," Milan Kundera remarks that "there are periods of modern history when life resembles the novels of Kafka" (105). Czechoslovakia in the 1950s was one of those times, and thus Mašek's surreal and grotesque aesthetic of Monster Cabaret found its ideal subject in the tragic execution of Rudolf Slánský, a high communist party functionary forced into false confessions and ultimately executed for treason. In fact, in Czech, the term "monstrproces" [monstrous trial] is used to describe these show trials.<sup>8</sup> 1952: *Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského* [1952: How



Fig. 2. Slánský is metaphorically linked to a “scapegoat” in *Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského*. © Vojtěch Mašek 2015.

Gottwald Murdered Slánský], (2014), is a graphic narrative published in conjunction with a nine-part television series on Czech history, *České století* [Czech Century], by historian Pavel Kosatík. Although the editor's remarks appear to distance the work from a strictly historical text,<sup>9</sup> he nonetheless makes a powerful bid to provoke the reader's conscience: "The aim is not to reconstruct or recount history; instead, [the authors] offer a striking glimpse into certain isolated conversations, into the thoughts of individual actors and their moments of doubt, conflict, opinions, and the different decisions they made." In this respect, the series echoes a larger trend in Czech popular culture, as a new generation comes to grips with its troubling history. Notably, the *Alois Nebel* trilogy by Jaroslav Rudiš and Jaromír 99 (collected in a single volume in 2006), also subsequently adapted into a film, deals with the traumas of WWII and the Communist period and stands out as the most famous example of a new post-1989 aesthetic in Czech comics. Similarly, *Jěště jsme ve válce* [We are Still at War] (2011) a project organized by the Center for Totalitarian Studies, represents the testimony of survivors of communism and WWII in comics form thanks to the collaboration of a number of Czech cartoonists. Thus, Kosatík's *České století*, which is comprised of nine books including the Gottwald-Slánský episode, already builds upon an increasing interest in bringing historical events to a broader public through the medium of comics. Each artist was free to invent their own visual interpretation independent of the original television serial.<sup>10</sup>

My aim in analyzing Mašek's work is not to evaluate the verisimilitude of the content—that is, Slánský and President Klement Gottwald's actual friendship and Slánský's execution—but rather to ask how he uses the comic to represent this story in a unique way. What is gained, aesthetically, by adapting what was originally a television script into a graphic narrative through Mašek's distinctive surrealist lens? In discussing Mašek's work, Kosatík praised Mašek's ability to evoke the atmosphere of what he calls the "temná poetika padesátech let" [dark poetics of the 1950s],<sup>11</sup> which he had already begun to develop in the fictional world of *Monster Cabaret*. I would like to consider Kosatík's mention of "poetics" in order to invoke Scott McCloud's concept of the visual metaphor, a literal representation of something more abstract and figurative. Describing David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik's comics adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, McCloud argues that "the mere use of visual metaphors doesn't automatically draw out the subtext in fiction, but when those symbols echo one another and relate directly to the story's central themes, the results can be mesmerizing" (34)—an assertion particularly suited to Mašek's surreal aesthetic.

For *Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského*, Mašek applies familiar devices from *Monster Cabaret* but his artistic embellishments assume a more sinister gravity when anchored in the specific historical circumstances surrounding these two communist officials. Beginning with the execution of Milada Horáková, the text corresponds to the actual transcript of her last words.<sup>12</sup> After this point, however, Mašek





Fig. 3. Tendrils and wires reveal surveillance networks in Kosatík and Mašek's *Jah Gottwald zavraždil Slánského*. © Vojtěch Mašek 2015.

follows Kosatík's script of the imagined private conversations that take place between Gottwald and Slánský as we witness how their friendship progressively deteriorates. Under pressure from Soviet advisors to find a traitor in their midst, the two officials argue about who might be at fault. Slánský wants to eliminate all of the Spanish agents under suspicion for spying because he believes that it is "better to arrest an innocent than let a guilty man go free." Gottwald accuses him of calling for a "pogrom," but Slánský stays firm. Mašek portrays Slánský in a highly unusual way; I want to pause here to consider a page in which this transformation first appears. The background is black, consistent with his *Monster Cabaret* books, contributing to the sinister atmosphere. In the top two panels, Slánský is depicted in profile and from the front, most likely on the basis of official photographs. This is Mašek's process—he alters images by drawing and painting over reproductions of pictures, which in this context is especially meaningful given the history of the falsification of photos under communism.<sup>13</sup> Below these panels are two longer, rectangular fragments containing a gargoyles from St. Vitus Cathedral, a reference to the opening scene of the script (not

portrayed in the graphic novel version). The last and largest panel depicts a bleating goat or ram; the juxtaposition of the character with this image establishes the central visual metaphor of Slánský as a “scapegoat” or “sacrificial lamb” (Fig. 2).

At this stage, Slánský’s role is somewhat ambiguous—one reviewer comments that [his] “dark curly hair changes into horns, and the character looks like something between a sacrificial lamb and Satan, which corresponds to his role as killer and victim” (Segi). Later in the narrative, the image of the gargoyle is paired with Slánský a second time at his official 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party. And here Mašek adds a scene not present in the original: a crowd of people throws him up into air, yelling “hip hip hooray” in celebration, but he drifts mysteriously upward, out of the panel. When his wife remarks, “I was scared for you, Rudy...at such a height... what if people didn’t catch you,” the irony of his answer is chilling: “You must trust people.” As the reader well knows, his friend Gottwald will ultimately betray him and hand him over to his Soviet executioners.

Another crucial aspect of Mašek’s dark poetics is the prevalence of twisting and intersecting lines throughout the narrative. Paranoid connections and suspicions are rendered visible through curling tendrils and red strands, which could be telephone wires, entrails, or both. These designs proliferate in the end papers and in the pages that separate different scenes within the book, literally and figuratively serving as the connective tissue that holds the story together. In a page that describes the planning of Slánský’s arrest, tangled lines snake between nightmarishly surreal images of faces and figures implicated in Slánský’s downfall: Gottwald, Alexej Čepička (his son-in-law), Stb (státní bezpečnost, secret police), and the outline of Slánský’s head, fractured and opened to reveal an empty shell with curling tendrils of wire inside. The last image in particular recalls Salvador Dali’s paintings of deconstructed faces, or even the hand in Luis Buñuel’s *Un chien andalou* (1929) that opens to reveal a mass of swarming ants (Fig.3).

This page also demonstrates the way in which Mašek constructs his style out of overlapping layers; rather than operating with a static black-on-white grid, he collages together small paintings which function as panels, making it occasionally difficult to trace fragments of text to their corresponding source. On other pages, hands are drawn at the bottom of what appear as surveillance transcripts, which adds to the three-dimensional quality of the story while also cleverly involving and implicating the reader.

Discussing Eddie Campbell’s *From Hell* (1999), Mašek describes how there are many “techniques that are not possible in film or literature—through the distortion of time, and the use of layering, [comics] communicate through text and image, and thus create a third meaning, a new perspective on reality,”<sup>14</sup> but he could just as easily be referring to his own work. Slánský’s impending doom is represented and foreshadowed in multiple forms in the graphic narrative. When representing Slánský’s execution, Mašek brings together the literal and the figurative, image and text, to

produce a startling and disturbing image. The faces of the Soviet advisors, whose visages have an eerie plastic quality as if they were made of clay, stretch into monstrous beaks that spear their victim Slánský while labeling him a “traitor.” The malleable and distorted features of these characters recall Švankmajer’s clay animations, but here the rather ridiculous and embarrassing “trunks” from *Monster Cabaret* transform into swords that pierce the victim’s body. A more realistic portrayal of his hanging is also represented, paralleling Milada Horáková’s execution at the beginning, although Mašek’s surreal invention is much more horrific.

What is at stake in depicting Slánský’s betrayal and execution using surreal and avant-garde inventions? Hillary Chute and Kate Polak, scholars who analyze the representation of history and trauma in graphic narratives, have embraced the subjective, idiosyncratic expressive possibilities of comics in this arena. Chute, in particular, argues that we need not turn away from trauma as “unrepresentable,” but rather explore how a cartoonist’s drawing style “materializes”—renders the invisible, visible—historical trauma. In visual studies, photography has already been debunked as an objective art form (since it can be manipulated), opening the path to other mediums of expression more affective, more creative, as a response to trauma (*Disaster Drawn* 25-35). Writing about Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Chute asserts that “Spiegelman’s characters are clearly humans overlaid with a visual metaphor—[which] provides a crucial layer of abstraction that creates a compelling tension with the book’s deeply researched specificity” (*Why Comics* 61). In *Ethics in the Gutter*, Polak notes that all of the attention directed to autographics and documentary comics has overlooked a crucial subset of graphic narrative that is based in historical reality, but is nonetheless fictional. Referencing Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction, Polak argues that we need a similar term for comics, and thus she proposes “historio-metagraphics” as a means of designating “works that deal with real-world events in fictional ways so as to comment on the way in which we shape narratives, receive them, and reframe them” (28).

Of the nine graphic narrative volumes of *Czech Century*, Mašek’s *Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského* goes furthest in Polak’s direction by not only illustrating historical events and people but also by employing visual metaphor to materialize connections and sinister connotations. As a work of historio-metagraphics, the book alludes to the way readers receive and reframe narratives, consistent with Polak’s assertion. Readers are drawn into the narrative through the hands depicted on fake interrogation transcripts, alluding to the audience’s participation and complicity in this history.<sup>15</sup> In Pavel Kořínek’s typology of adaptations,<sup>16</sup> Mašek’s work would fall into the third category, which does not only illustrate or seek to resurrect forgotten works, but changes the form of the comic to create an original interpretation of a work (164). Precisely because Mašek does not come out of a comics tradition, he freely experiments and breaks standard conventions.

## Return of the Avant-garde

One of Mašek's later projects—*Recykliteratura* [Recycleliterature] (2015, with Baban)—is yet another creative revolution in the development of his avant-garde aesthetic. This time his work focuses on humor rather than horror, and both the text and image are “found” objects from old magazines; a surrealist aesthetic emerges through the singular juxtaposition of these two elements. He originally got the idea from creating the *Monstrkabaret* books using old photos and film stills, which he then painted and altered to fit his story. In this case, he decided to democratize the process and make it into a game that anyone could participate in through a series of public workshops in Prague. The rules of the game called for a more constrained method of composition than the *Monstrkabaret* series: participants could not draw on the photos or alter the texts, nor could they collage the pictures together. What results is an amusing, sometimes hilarious, mash-up of discarded images from another era. Literary critic Dominik Melichar compares this work to early twentieth century Dadaism and to the experimental literature of Devětsil, a Czech avant-garde movement from the interwar period. Melichar also traces these odd text-image combinations to the tradition of the theater of the absurd as practiced by Alfred Jarry, Eugene Ionesco, and Václav Havel. In this case, the resulting artwork is not the result of a single artist or author, but rather the product of a collective author. Mašek and Baban, as the architects of the project, successfully combined old and new media to create this piece: funds for publication of the book were crowd-sourced, with participants recruited through Facebook.

Although Mašek's style and approach seem unique in the context of the Czech comics, I would concur with Melichar and place his work within the avant-garde tradition. The imaginative world of Brunold's cabaret in *Monstrkabaret* series evokes interwar provocations of Berlin Dada and French Surrealism, as well as the Czech variants of these movements in Devětsil and Czech surrealism (Jindřich Štyrský and Karel Teige in particular). Formally speaking, Mašek has embraced collage as a medium through which he can juxtapose complex and multivalent narrative strands. But Mašek's aesthetic is both more playful and deliberately constructed than André Breton's original exhortation that surrealism should consist of “automatic writing” and “unconscious” processes. In addition to cutting and pasting disparate photos and film stills, he uses overpainting (a technique originally developed by surrealist Max Ernst); that is, the application of gouache and ink drawings to an image. This combination of collage and overpainting gives Mašek additional expressive possibilities such that he can add painterly effects and fantastic elaborations to the source image.<sup>17</sup> And these effects often function in ideologically subversive ways: a propaganda image becomes an object of ridicule; a party official is painted to appear grotesque and sinister; an arrogant business consultant has a blank smiling face.

In her discussion of surrealist collage in the work of Max Ernst, art historian Elsa Adamowitz develops a definition that provides insight into Mašek's work:

As a pragmatic act, collage encompasses various complementary or conflictual functions—critical, poetic, and political—which cohabit throughout the 1920s and 30s. As a technique, collage is a material mode of cutting and pasting distant elements [...] As a subversive act, it is an instrument of *détournement*...(13)

Mašek uses his method of collage and painting as a form of *détournement* to debunk and expose mendacity before *and* after 1989. Moreover, he continually “draw[s] attention to the intertextual process itself,” by revealing his own graphic narrative as a formal construction (15). Adamowitz also highlights “the recurrent motif of the pointing hand, the frame within the frame, the theater set or podium” [...] (15) within Ernst's collages. Her observations effectively describe the structure of the *Monstrkabaret* series as well, since we must switch between Damian's story and the dialog between Schlectfreund and Jožef, and decide if both are simply acts in Brunold's spectacle, or if one can be subsumed within the other. As readers of Mašek's work, we are like the audience in the *Monstrkabaret*, invited to participate in the game when we attempt to disentangle dream from reality through multiple narrative levels. But the game has a purpose that is fundamentally subversive, for he is continually challenging our assumptions about identity—who is the “freak” and what is “normal”?—as one character unpredictably transforms into another.

## Notes

- 1 This is a particularly clever title in Czech, because “Last Year in Marienbad” is translated as “Loni v marienbadu,” which is close to “Sloni v marienbadu” [Elephants in Marienbad].
- 2 Information regarding Muriel awards can be found at <http://komiksfest.cz/vysledky-cen-muriel-2009/> (with a reference to the relevant year). All told, Mašek has won ten Muriels for his work on *Monstrkabaret* as well as other projects.
- 3 For a review of this work, see Tomáš Stejskal, “Komiks Svatá Barbora je vrchol české tvorby. Z kuřimské kauzy činí thriller i úvahu o pravdě a lži,” *Aktuálně.cz*, 3/13/18, <https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/komiks-svata-barbora-je-vrchol-ceske-tvorby-zkurimske-kauzy/r-b29b90a826a911e8b8efac1f6b220ee8/>. Accessed 4/19/18.
- 4 Correspondence with the author, July 15, 2017. “Jan Švankmajer je mým velkým vzorem, jeho rafinovaný surrealismus a kombinování snu a syrové reality mě zřejmě velmi ovlivnilo. Svým způsobem cítím i vliv filmu Pavla Juráčka či Jana Němce

ze šedesátých let, ve kterých se podařilo zkombinovat skutečnou absurditu doby s metaforickou rovinou fantaskního podobenství. Také je mi blízká poetika a svět režiséra Davida Lynche.” [Jan Švankmajer is an important model for me. His refined surrealism and combination of dream and reality was a major influence. Similarly, I’m inspired by [film directors] Pavel Jurack and Jan Němec from the 1960s, in which they managed to merge the real absurdity of the time with a fantastic, metaphorical level. [My aesthetic] is also akin to the poetics of director David Lynch.]

- 5 To date, this story is not translated into English, and I have relied on Marek Přibíl’s Czech translation (2004) included in *Sloni v marienbadu*.
- 6 See his interview with Klára Kolářová, <https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/salon/339048-scenarista-a-vytvarnik-vojtech-Masek-komiks-umi-veci-ktere-literatura-ne.html>
- 7 See Baban and Mašek’s interview with Jan Velinger: “We like and always liked open endings, so this trilogy ends a bit open. There is always a shadow of evil that remains but you can still be happy... even if you are an anti-hero... with a trunk! So this is the message.” <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/arts/dzian-baban-vojtech-masek-creators-of-an-unusual-czech-graphic-novel-about-a-man-with-a-trunk>
- 8 See Václav Cihla, “Politické procesy v 50. letech,” Diplomová práce, Univerzita Karlova v Praze, 2013. He uses the term “monstrproces” several times when describing Slánský’s trial.
- 9 David Pazdera is identified as the “odpovědný redaktor” [authorized editor] of the volume on the back page.
- 10 Mašek deliberately did not watch the televised version before he created his comics adaptation. Correspondence with the author.
- 11 See the interview on Czech television where Kosatík discusses the graphic narrative adaptations (10/31/2013): <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/kultura/1068013-podivejte-se-vznik-a-pad-ceskoslovenska-v-komiksu>
- 12 See David Mrnka’s film *Milada*, a Czech/American production, Loaded Vision Entertainment, 2017.
- 13 See David King’s *The Commissar Vanishes: the falsification of art and photos in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997). For an example, see pages 40-41 for a photo of Lenin and Trotsky in 1919, and then again in a 1967 version of the photo in which Trotsky is excluded.
- 14 See his interview with Klára Kolářová: <https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/salon/339048-scenarista-a-vytvarnik-vojtech-Masek-komiks-umi-veci-ktere-literatura-ne.html>
- 15 This device has been used in other graphic narratives, most notably in Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2007).

- 16 Kořínek identifies three types of adaptation: the first category concerns transmedial adaptations, in which the function of the comic is primarily to *ilustrovat* [illustrate]; the second is primarily about bringing canonical works into comics form in order to *připomenout* (resurrect or recuperate) them; and the third type goes furthest in altering the comics form—*stvořit*—through adaptation and thus creates a new, parallel artistic work.
- 17 See Rosalind Krauss's description of Max Ernst's overpainting technique in "The Master's Bedroom," *Representations*, No. 28 (Fall 1989) 62-64.

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Martin Foret

## Regardless of Context: Graphic Novels with the Faceless (and Homelandless) Hero of Branko Jelinek

In 2002, an excerpt from comics artist Branko Jelinek's graphic novel *Oskar Ed* appeared on the web portal Komiks.cz, one of the main platforms for the Czech(oslovak) comics scene at the time. It immediately attracted attention due to its unusual character. With its specific visual form, rendered in cross-hatched pen and ink drawings, it resembled nothing else in Czech comics of that era. The nature of the excerpt, evidently from an extensive longer opus, generated great expectations in an environment that primarily consisted of only short pieces. This internet excerpt thus launched the extraordinary work of this comics author, whose two graphic novel projects—a trilogy titled *Oskar Ed* (2003–2006), and a graphic novel, *Oskar Ed: Můj největší sen* [Oskar Ed: My Greatest Dream] (2016)—rank among the most remarkable and highly-regarded Czech comics projects after 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Before delving into Jelinek's work, a few words on the context of the *Oskar Ed* graphic novels. Czech comics (and Slovak comics even more so) found itself in a deep crisis in the mid-1990s. Artists who had contributed to the feverish development of Czechoslovak comics during the transition era after the fall of the Communist regime had somehow disappeared, as the previous space for publishing comic art drastically narrowed or even vanished.<sup>2</sup> A completely new, mostly uprooted generation appeared after 2000, without any artistic connections to the previous one. In many respects this generation began from scratch, from the metaphorical point zero (hence the label "Generation Zero").<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the entire local comics market underwent a transformation: comics were no longer predominantly published in magazines, as had been the case from the mid-nineteenth century up to the end of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Now the book format became the most common publishing platform. Hardly an isolated phenomenon, this change came about in connection with the global emergence of so-called *graphic novels*.<sup>5</sup> With comics for children and teenagers still the most common form of Czechoslovak comics in

the second half of the twentieth century, projects dealing with adult themes and intended for adult readers remained something of a novelty after 1989.<sup>6</sup>

Formally, C5-format (16.5 × 23 cm) black-and-white trilogies had become established as the dominant model of publishing in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Black-and-white printing largely pertains to production issues since it is cheaper; for the same reason, publishers ordinarily split narratives into three books instead of one longer and more expensive one. Such was the case with the first *Oskar Ed* trilogy (2003–2006). Unfortunately, at the time of publication Jelinek's work was overshadowed by competitors which received more media attention (the *Alois Nebel* trilogy, 2003–2005, collected in 2006) or won more awards (*Monstrkabaret Freda Brunolda uvádí* [Fred Brunold's Monster-Cabaret Presents...] trilogy, 2004–2009).<sup>7</sup>

### Alternative Comics debut

**B**ranko Jelinek (1978) worked on his first Oskar Ed story for a long time without any hope of getting it published. At that historical moment (around 2000) there was no market and no established publishers for adult-themed graphic novels in the Czech Republic. However, a sample of his work appeared online in 2002, and one year later the small comics publisher Mot published the first volume of the trilogy; the two remaining volumes followed in 2004 and 2006.<sup>8</sup>

By 2000, Mot had already made a name for itself by releasing a translation of the first volume of the French graphic memoir *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* by David B. [Epileptic, Czech: Padoucnice], from the independent publisher L'Association. They continued to focus on the European alternative scene in the following years, by publishing prominent figures such as Lewis Trondheim (France), Max Andersson (Sweden), and Thomas Ott (Switzerland).<sup>9</sup> The press' mission also supported the development of domestic comics, and published the fanzine *Pot*<sup>10</sup> as early as the second year of its existence. The first volume of *Oskar Ed* in 2003 launched its series *Motýl* [Butterfly], dedicated to original domestic comics. Mot was not able to publish Jelinek's ambitious, almost three-hundred-page project as a single work due to production costs, among other considerations. The Czech book market as a whole was not yet ready (in terms of logistics) for an expensive comic book by an unknown debut author.<sup>11</sup>

While multiple factors contributed to the limited commercial success of the *Oskar Ed* trilogy at that time (e.g. a small publisher; almost no publicity; sales in stores that specialized in science fiction, as comics were not then sold in regular bookshops, etc.), there seems little doubt that, more than anything else, the Czech comics market had simply not sufficiently developed; it was released too soon. Five years later, Jelinek's narrative would most likely have resonated much more with the domestic comics scene, which by then had undergone a radical transformation. Finally, the first volume's mysterious storyline raised nothing

but questions, leaving some readers dissatisfied. This too had a definite effect, as Oskar's story works best when read in its entirety.<sup>12</sup> It would seem that the technical, production and logistical issues which beset this publisher led directly to Jelinek's work in its original form flying mostly under the radar.

### Out of the Boxes, Out of Context

The aforementioned comics competitors to *Oskar Ed*, published at approximately the same time, seem much more typically Czech in a number of respects. *Alois Nebel* by the writer Jaroslav Rudiš (1972) and artist Jaromír 99 (1963) in many senses epitomizes a literary "Czechness," serving as a sort of digest of Czech history from the perspective of the ordinary Czechs or Czech "little man" ("malý člověk").<sup>13</sup> It serves as an illustration of how Czechs view the world and what they perceive as essential, determining and defining. The work makes copious references to great 20<sup>th</sup>-century Czech writers and their works, in particular *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* [The Good Soldier Švejk, 1923] by Jaroslav Hašek and *Ostře sledované vlaky* [Closely Watched Trains, 1965] by Bohumil Hrabal. Thus *Alois Nebel's* "Czechness" is so intense that the work comes across, first and foremost, as a record of Czech history and the Czech mentality.

Rudiš and Jaromír 99's opus exemplifies the Czech approach to comics as one of citation and localization: just as graphic narrative was viewed as a foreign element in Czech culture under Communism, even after Communism the form is "domesticated" and adjusted to a specifically Czech sensibility. This "domestication" is manifested in Czech comics' strong emphasis on the literary character of a work, not only in terms of its relative verbosity, but its technical execution as well (a simple font, small lettering, etc.)—and this despite the fact that the artist has the ability to confidently narrate by means of pictures.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis is on *literature*—comics as literature—but literature first and foremost.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps as a result of these characteristics (compare, for example, Alaniz 2016, 2018 and Kuhlman 2009, 2013), the first *Alois Nebel* book, *Bílý Potok* [White Brook] became a bestseller in 2003, receiving a great deal of attention and publicity, which was unprecedented for a work of Czech comics. The production and marketing skill of the publisher, Labyrint, undoubtedly helped; it deftly made use of this success and announced, after an agreement with the authors, that what was originally a one-off project was now the first volume of a trilogy.<sup>16</sup> Though it also eclipsed many others, perhaps better, comics released at the same time, it is undoubtedly *Alois Nebel* and its success which helped establish the format of the modern Czech graphic novel.

Similarly, Džian Baban and Vojtěch Mašek's trilogy about the fictional world of impresario Fred Brunold<sup>17</sup> is in many respects strongly rooted in the domestic environment of Central Europe, the territory of former Austria-Hungary and the later satellites of the Soviet Union. Although these narratives may seem, on the



Fig. 1. Jelinek's landscapes in *Oskar Ed*, with skyscrapers and signs in English, resemble American cities. *Oskar Ed*, part 3. Branko Jelinek, Mot, 2006

surface, absurd, in a surreal, hyperbolized way they actually give expression to the various frustrations of Czechs past and present. If *Alois Nebel* could be compared (at least in terms of structure and focus) to the work of Hašek and Hrabal, then *Fred Brunold's Monster-Cabaret presents...* could be in a similar manner arguably likened (in terms of poetry and the approach to work with the source material) to the legacy of filmmaker Jan Švankmajer (although the method of collage and drawing on magazine photographs is obviously based on different principles than those used in animated film technology). Given their film studies background, Mašek and Baban's work is also influenced by examples of the Czechoslovak New Wave of the 1960s, specifically those dedicated to various parables, such as the works *O slavnosti a hostech* [The Party and the Guests] (1966) by Jan Němec or *Den sedmý, osmá noc* [The Seventh Day, the Eighth Night] (1969) by Evald Schorm and Jan Kačer.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, domestic genre comics (such as science fiction, fantasy, historical adventures, crime stories, thrillers etc., popular in Francophone comics, for example) practically did not develop at all in the first decade after the year 2000 (and this remains the case to a significant extent). The above-mentioned alternative works thus not only represent the most commercially successful and best-reviewed projects, they also typify Czech comics production.

Jelinek's work, on the other hand, with its more global frame of reference, goes beyond the "conventional" and "domestic" scope of Czech comics. An exception within the Czech scene, *Oskar Ed* deliberately avoids the national "rootedness" of *Alois Nebel* and *Fred Brunold*. It could easily have appeared originally in the Netherlands or Belgium, for example, or Finland or the USA. In many respects, it belongs on the same book shelf as Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), Dan Clowes' *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (1993) and Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003). Indeed, Jelinek refers to these important authors and works as his models.<sup>19</sup> Jelinek's work is an interesting example of transnational comics production (as argued by Denson - Meyer - Stein 2014), given that his comics are informed specifically by the global canon of graphic narrative—that is, he is more influenced by translated works than by the domestic national tradition. Despite the ostensibly American setting, one can even analyze Jelinek as an example of "a non-American artist working in traditionally American idioms and genres" (ibidem: 5). Unlike the "quintessentially Czech" *Alois Nebel* and *Fred Brunold*, a translation of the *Oskar Ed* trilogy would not lose anything essential in terms of its impact on the Czech reader.

I would also argue that the fictional world of the Oskar Ed stories feels the most culturally similar to the USA (and certainly not to the Czech Republic)—at least in how it represents everyday life. Jelinek includes many references to and elements connected with American culture, at least the sort which Czechs know from television: skyscrapers, apartment buildings with outdoor emergency exit stairs, fast food chains on the highways, gas stations, police cars, service uniforms, etc.<sup>20</sup>

## The Loneliness of the Slovak Runner in Czech Comics

Jelinek's work is interesting in how it significantly deviates from the Czech comics context in form as well as content. One could, of course, account for this phenomenon by simply pointing out that he is not Czech—and that therefore to thematize his work in the context of Czech comics is erroneous in principle, since his creative development has been impacted from the very beginning by the fact that Branko Jelinek is Slovak. He was born in 1978 in the central Slovak town of Banská Štiavnica in (at the time, Socialist) Czechoslovakia. He attended secondary school at the School of Applied Arts in Košice, followed by university studies of graphics and book illustration at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. Although he moved to Prague in 2006 and has lived in the Czech Republic since then, and works as Lead Artist and as Head of Assets and Maps Design in a Czech software company developing computer games, Jelinek retains his Slovak citizenship (as far as the Czech Republic is concerned he has only temporary, not permanent residency<sup>21</sup>), therefore officially he is a foreign national in the Czech Republic.

There nonetheless exist valid reasons for viewing Jelinek's work in the context of Czech comics, even if strictly speaking his work stands out; for one thing, it simply does not appear in any other context. His graphic narrative, at least in book form, has been published primarily in the Czech language; both readers and critics view it as produced within the framework of Czech comics; and it has even earned festival prizes in categories for domestic (that is, Czech, not translated) comics.<sup>22</sup> Jelinek himself, like many other people of his generation and older who were born in Czechoslovakia, feels like a Czechoslovak and has seen interest in his work primarily from Czech readers, critics and reviewers.<sup>23</sup> Jelinek has not published his comics in Slovakia and ironically, the Slovak "edition" of the *Oskar Ed* trilogy, which Mot published concurrently with the Czech version, had to be terminated after a second volume due to minimal sales in the Slovak market.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to the publication of the trilogy's first book, Jelinek had not published any other comics work or any short stories in fanzines. He did subsequently, apart from his main trilogy, publish a number of short comics stories with his character in fanzines or magazines (the first, an eight-page story, *V parku* [In the Park], appeared the same year as the first volume of the trilogy in the journal *Aargh!* No. 4, as well as in the anthology *Warburger*, initiated by the editorial board of the Slovenian magazine *Stripburger*);<sup>25</sup> one of these was uncharacteristically created in color and won the Grand Prix at the 2010 International Festival of Comics and Games in Łódź, Poland.<sup>26</sup> After a decade of further toil, Jelinek published the graphic novel *Oskar Ed: Můj největší sen* [Oskar Ed: My Greatest Dream] in 2016, this time in one complete volume (and in a larger format more appropriate to the material). The response from critics and readers was more or less instantaneous and this time extremely positive.<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 2. Jelinek's aesthetic is influenced by Japanese Manga and French alternative comics, while retaining its own unique combination of the ordinary and the fantastic. *Oskar Ed: Muj největší sen* [Oskar Ed: My greatest dream]. Branko Jelinek, Lipnik, 2016.



## Branko Jelinek casts Oskar Ed

The name “Oskar Ed” appears in the titles of both the trilogy and *Můj největší sen*, and Jelinek conceives of this character as a sort of actor. As his ostensible “director,” the author works well with him, likes him and therefore includes him in his work. It is not actually the same hero in both works; the second book does not serve as a prequel to the trilogy, as the “casting” of Oskar Ed in both might seem to indicate. The “actor” Oskar Ed also cuts a strange figure: his face blank, elusive, devoid of features, merely eyes and a mouth. This makes him difficult to read, and his moods often defy interpretation. Jelinek nevertheless manages to spark interest in his hero’s life, along with his demons, even on an emotional level.

Jelinek presents Oskar Ed in his debut trilogy as someone capable of conversing with inanimate objects, or, more precisely, someone often aggressively confronted by objects (e.g., an apple accuses him of racism and a tomato of genocide). Although we learn that this ability (or curse) actually began in his childhood, the story focuses on Oskar as an adult, when the phenomenon begins to reassert itself, severely complicating his life. The hero transforms into a monster; his curse drives him to murder and he goes on the run from the police—as well as from himself, fleeing from what he is turning into and fears. Modern big-city spaces and apartments in high-rises form the predominant backdrop to the plot. The intrusion of the fantastic (a marked aspect of this work) intervenes in Oskar’s fate from the “outside,” against his will, unwanted and unwelcome.

In contrast, the second graphic novel, *Oskar Ed: Můj největší sen*, consists of fantasy in varied environments for the hero, now a sensitive young boy with a rich inner life and healthy imagination. On the one hand, this fantasy world offers a welcome escape from an often cruel and stressful reality, while also creating a space for coming to terms with his worsening problems and intensifying emotions, which he could not otherwise handle on his own. Jelinek melds everyday reality with fantastic situations, transfiguring a banal trip from point A to point B (mostly along an empty landscape dotted only by roadhouses and gas stations) into a dramatic and unusual “road trip” overlaid by the truly surreal dream of the title.<sup>28</sup>

Family, dysfunctionality and gradual collapse form a key theme in both works: in the first, through the absence of a father figure who precisely through that absence remains an all-defining presence; in the second, through a mother who keeps inexplicably disappearing. Both figures play an important role in the series, even when they do not actually appear. The presence/absence trope leads in both volumes to surprising, though not forced, closing messages, very open to interpretation.

Jelinek proved a conscientious narrator in his debut work. If we were to mention any shortcomings, we could point to his drawings, which have minor limitations in the first trilogy (for example, in the relationship between the author’s stylization and

the anatomical verisimilitude of character depictions). The second graphic novel shows a marked improvement in all senses, with reviewers praising his imaginative skill, his remarkable composition and his masterful drawing. His precise, sharp lines and skillful cross-hatching is especially apparent in the large-scale A4 format.<sup>29</sup> Jelinek released this second graphic novel at a time when, at last, several Czech presses had emerged to publish original domestic graphic novels or even had a special imprint for them.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from the aforementioned models, *Můj největší sen* shows the influence of French alternative comics and Japanese Manga: the art, with its careful cross-hatching and narrative approach, often evokes Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1982-1990). Despite the mix of influences, Jelinek maintains his own style at the level of expression, as well as in his handling of tempo, chapter divisions, alternation of the banal with the fantastic, and in his construction of single- and double-page compositions (Fig. 2).

In the first trilogy, Jelinek divides pages into a minimum of two and (occasionally) a maximum of nine panels. He most often, however, works with four to six panels on a page, using splash pages only at the end. In *Můj největší sen*, on the other hand, he places up to ten panels on a page, most frequently using around seven. Jelinek deploys the alternation of various panel types, shapes and sizes to subtly emphasize details, as well as to frustrate or incite readerly tempo. Page compositions, apart from various parallelisms, often heighten the drama through unusual shot angles, as when a building's construction beams form panels to contain the scenes, or to mimic surveillance cams. If we were to ignore how the first Oskar Ed story was broken into three thin paperback volumes (or "trilogy"), which from a contemporary perspective might create a markedly "poorer" impression than its successor's larger, bound, single volume format, then the two works have much in common as to their form. Jelinek divides the former into fourteen chapters, six to thirty pages each, most often ten to twenty. The latter, however, he chooses to organize into twenty-three chapters (including prologue and epilogue), each made up of seven to twenty-two pages (again most often between ten and twenty, while the epilogue has only two pages). In both works he titles chapters with excerpted passages from dialogues (or monologues) occurring in the given chapter.

### **Childhood, Family Trauma and the Formative Power of Fantasy**

**T**he *Oskar Ed* trilogy's main plot unfolds in the present, with the hero on the run from the police. Passages presented from his perspective alternate with chapters depicting the detectives on his trail, along with childhood memories exploring the roots of Oskar's "curse" and fantastic dreamy passages in which his subconscious seeks out answers to the incomprehensible events which befall him. The second Oskar Ed narrative, *Můj největší sen*, pairs passages from the present with the hero's

memories as well, though here the alternations primarily involve fantasy flights from the tension-filled car the protagonist shares with his parents.

Compared to the first trilogy's dramatic police pursuit and collapse of not only Oskar's subjective world, but gradually even of the diegetic reality itself, *Můj největší sen* comes across as the simpler work, despite its own multi-layered complexity. It remains relatively straightforward in its storytelling throughout, even with fantastic side adventures which interrupt its main "road movie"-like narrative. The first trilogy, in contrast, has a more complicated plot and is therefore more equivocal; for example, the father-figure is gradually manifested as some kind of mysterious all-powerful entity.

The two narrative works together create an odd and affecting balance. While Oskar, in the earlier trilogy, changes the "objective" world, transforming it with his remarkable peculiarity, he "only" comes to terms with it in the second narrative, as his fantasies create conditions that make a kind of idiosyncratic sense. He tries to bring his child's world into harmony with the adult realm but is continually frustrated; he feels persecuted, his eccentricity misunderstood. In school, his imagination is viewed as inadequate and he is sent to a guidance counselor; another time, he is beaten up when he finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, too close to a couple intent on enjoying an intimate moment. While in the earlier work, the adult Oskar runs from the police as well as from his family past, in the later graphic novel the young boy escapes his traumatic present into a fantasy world. Oskar uses his powers of imagination to "adjust" the real world, defined primarily by his painful family situation (arising from his parents' complicated relationship and an unfortunate accident), as well as the bullying of other children due to his awkwardness.

Each of the first narrative's three parts include a citation on their back covers from "The White People," a 1904 horror story by Welsh writer Arthur Machen: "What would your feelings be, seriously, [...] if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning?" Showing empathy for his quarry Oskar Ed, Jelinek's lead detective (with a southern Slavic name, Zdravko Čolič), asks his colleagues something similar: "Wouldn't you be frightened if the cup which you had been drinking coffee from for several years began to talk?" Though not included in the Oskar Ed citation, the Machen short story explains that these hypothetical situations represent examples of sin—namely the sins of Oskar's father, which in all probability provide the key to the entire tragedy.

Similarly symptomatic of *Můj největší sen* is a passage from Oskar's monologue, in which he states, "Father was the only one in our family able, at any time, to switch over to his own world, where only his own rules prevailed" (67). This resonates powerfully as a (tragi)comical subtext, since Oskar Ed does precisely this whenever the surrounding world and its stresses grow too uncomfortable for him. While his own private "world" seems a jovial mode of existence to his father, making him a

better man in his own eyes, for Oskar it only creates a disturbing nightmare, a world of disintegration and decay.

*Oskar Ed*, with its formal complexity, as well as a universalizing “non-Czechness” which resists transnational homogeneity, stands out among the most remarkable of Czech graphic novels. Its openness to foreign models of graphic narrative does not descend to seeking out the most common denominator, but instead advances a deeply moral vision of childhood trauma and the many emotions linked with it, which resonate over the course of a life.

## Notes

- 1 Apart from the acclaim *Můj největší sen* earned from juries of comics specialists who grant the national prize Muriel for the best comics published in a given year, and from journalists, theoreticians, etc., one should mention reviews on the Czech database ComicsDB.cz. Most of the evaluations are extremely positive (the highest possible), with remarks that called the book “the best Czechoslovak comic of all time” (see <https://comicsdb.cz/comics/6164/oskar-ed-muj-nejvetsi-sen>).
- 2 The agreed-upon dissolution of Czechoslovakia on 1 January 1993 (and thus the division of the market), was followed by a collapse of the distribution network of periodicals and the termination of practically all of the comics magazines which made up the predominant platform for domestic comics after the fall of Communism and the social changes at the time after the end of the year 1989.
- 3 The “zero” label for this creative generation not only referred to “point zero” and the milestone year 2000, from which the work of these members began to appear, but also to the non-existent (“zero”) publication space and the no (“zero”) payments. For authors belonging to this generation, see the anthology *Generace nula. Český komiks 2000–2010* [Generation Zero. Czech comics 2000–2010] assembled by Tomáš Prokůpek and published in 2010. This built on the exhibition of the same name from 2007 with the sub-title *Nová vlna českého a slovenského komiksu* [New Wave of Czech and Slovak Comics], which was exhibited in various Czech cities as well as in Poland, Sweden and France. Branko Jelinek with his *Oskar Ed* was also represented in the exhibition, the catalogue and in the consequent anthology (with the short story *V parku* [In the Park]).
- 4 On the form of Czech comics and its defining link to the periodical in the nineteenth century, compare Prokůpek - Foret 2016 and in the twentieth century also Prokůpek - Kořínek - Foret - Jareš 2014.
- 5 Interesting is the fact that the first attempts at a book format of comics designated for adult readers actually came about in the Czechoslovak environment as early as the end of the 1960s, with the creation of two planned books (out of a supposedly

- planned twelve) from the cycle *Muriel a anděl Ro* [Muriel and Angel Ro] by the writer Miloš Macourek and the artist Kája Saudek. These could not be published, however, after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and the consequent normalization period. They were only published after two and then four decades—*Muriel a andělé* [Muriel and Angels] in 1991 (complete edition in 2014), *Muriel a oranžová smrt* [Muriel and the Orange Death] in 2009. The first of these was included in the Czech version of the publication by Paul Gravett *1001 Comics You Must Read Before You Die* [1001 komiksů, které musíte přečíst, než zemřete, 2013].
- 6 It would seem that space for Czech comics for adults in the form of books was prepared on the market by translated comics, first and foremost, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, published in the years 1997 and 1998 in a prestigious intellectual publishing house (which never published any other comics, before or after), as well as *Sin City* by Frank Miller, published in 1999.
  - 7 This established format of a trilogy was accepted, although not always adhered to, with projects such as *Voleman* (four volumes in 2007–2010) by Jiří Grus (born 1978), *130* (three volumes in the years 2009, 2010 and 2015, the announced fourth volume has not been completed as yet) by Michal “Nikkarin” Menšík (born 1987) and *Pán času* [Time Master] (first volume in 2006, the whole collected in one book in 2012) by the writer Filip Novák (born 1974) and the artist Jan “Hza” Bažant (born 1979). It would appear that most Czech comics published after 2010 were released as one-time projects, without continuation.
  - 8 The first two volumes of the *Oskar Ed* trilogy were published in parallel in Slovak (this actually being the original) language versions. The final third volume was only published in Czech (in a translation by Ivan Dorčiak) due to the practically negligible sales on the Slovak market.
  - 9 Mot closed as of 2012.
  - 10 The name of the fanzine *Pot* combined a reference to the English “pot” (in the sense of “melting pot”) and the Czech “pot” (English “sweat”) and expressed the idea of the open creative platform for—with sweat on their face and without any expectation of remuneration—work by enthusiastic comics authors. The project came to an end a year later with the third volume and the fourth came about consequently in 2004 “post mortem” as part of another fanzine project.
  - 11 It is important to acknowledge that Jelinek, at the time of the publication of the first volume, had not even completed the third part of *Oskar Ed* or prepared it for publication.
  - 12 The *Oskar Ed* trilogy was eventually published together as one volume in a Polish translation in 2009. Interestingly, the Polish edition, with its larger and more developed book market, sold out in contrast to the Czech market.
  - 13 For links to Czech history and additional thematic specifics of the *Alois Nebel* trilogy, cf. the study by Martha Kuhlman (2009, 2013).

- 14 Two years after the publication of the concluding work of the *Alois Nebel* trilogy, in the year 2007, Jaromír 99 published *Bomber*. And although a large part of the “silent” scenes are accompanied by “a soundtrack,” that is, texts of songs, the text receives less emphasis than in *Alois Nebel*, in which the writer Rudiš has a more prominent voice.
- 15 It should be emphasized that when *Alois Nebel* was published, adults only had minimal experience with comics in the Czech book market. The Czech edition of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman had received deserved attention from both the media and readers, but was perceived as a definite exception. Several other comics intended for adult readers (apart from *Sin City* or *Epileptic* by David B.) were not all that successful, and were primarily appreciated by a small sub-culture of comics readers. *Alois Nebel* was the breakthrough graphic novel and one can speculate as to what extent the “literary” character of the work made this possible.
- 16 The volume *Hlavní nádraží* [Central Station] was published immediately the following year in 2004 and then the final volume *Zlaté hory* [Golden Mountains] in 2005; a collected publication was then issued in 2006 (360 pages in all), which also provided an alternative ending.
- 17 For more information on this topic, see the previous chapter by Martha Kuhlman.
- 18 Both authors, Mašek and Baban, studied screenwriting at Film and TV School of The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU). Mašek currently teaches in the Department of Screenwriting and Dramaturgy at FAMU.
- 19 See the interview with Branko Jelinek in the *Aargh!* No. 13 (2014) and Jelinek’s profile on the website *Komiks.cz* (<http://komiks.cz/clanek.php?id=511>).
- 20 Oskar Ed’s father pays in Czech crowns at the gas station in the second of the graphic novels despite the fact that all of the signs are in English and the attendant reads an English language newspaper (171). And although the automobiles and uniforms of the police look like they are from an American film, the names on the doorbells of the building where Oscar Ed is taken, when he wanders off on his way home from school, are only in Czech (209).
- 21 His wife and children have permanent residence status and also have Slovak citizenship (his wife also has Serbian citizenship, as she comes from the Serbian part of former Yugoslavia).
- 22 The final volume of the trilogy was nominated in the category of best original scenario in 2007 and the consequent graphic novel *Oskar Ed: Můj největší sen* [Oskar Ed: My Greatest Dream] was awarded the Muriel prize twice in 2016, as best original script and as best original book.
- 23 It is interesting to note that Jelinek had “Slovakia” written in brackets after his name in the already-mentioned *Aargh!* review—in volume 4 from the year 2003, where he published for the first time (and when he did actually live in Slovakia), while “SK/CZ” was listed in the last volume 17 from 2017, which (now as

- a long-term Prague resident) he contributed to with a short comic with Oskar Ed.
- 24 One should mention at this point that after the division of the Czechoslovak market for comics publications and in particular domestic Slovak comics production, little has come about up until the present. Here and there a small publishing project emerges, but these are only exceptions which prove the rule. This is the same case with Jelinek and another Slovak artist of the same generation, Mikuláš Podprocký (born 1978), who published his two graphic novels *Divočina* [Wilderness] (2013) and *Divočina II: Exodus* [Wilderness 2: Exodus] (2018) through a Czech publishing house and only in Czech. The Slovak Facebook comics phenomenon *Rudo* by Daniel Majling (1980) was also published in a collected volume only in Czech with a Prague publishing house in 2015. In light of the number of inhabitants, the Slovak book market is half the size of the Czech one due to disproportionate reception; while Slovak readers are able and willing to read books in Czech which are readily available in Slovakia (along with Czech magazines), the reverse is not true. When it comes to comics publications, with only a minimum of exceptions, it is basically one market: books released in Czech are also available to interested Slovak readers.
  - 25 It was consequently also included in the above-mentioned anthology *Generace nula* [Generation Zero].
  - 26 This was the first time the Polish jury ever awarded the prize to an artist from abroad. Jelinek was considered “a Czech illustrator” by the jury (see <http://archiwum.komiksfestiwal.com/2010/10/grand-prix-dla-branko-jelinka/>), which is how he was also referred to in the Polish media. See <https://plasterlodzki.pl/sztuka/malarstwo-grafika/festiwal-komiksu-2010-gala-finaowa-fotowideo/>). The prize winning two-page comic *Pout'* [Carnival] was published five years later (referred to as *Oskar Ed*) in the American magazine *Heavy Metal* (No. 270). Another of Jelinek's short Oskar Ed comics received an award in the same festival in 2016.
  - 27 Seven out of eleven Czech journalists, critics and theoreticians chose the graphic novel *Oskar Ed: Můj největší sen* [Oskar Ed: My Greatest Dream] as comic of the year on the Komiksárium website (and others mentioned it as being amongst the best, see <https://www.komiksarium.cz/index.php/2017/02/jaky-byl-rok-2016-nejlepsi-ceske-a-slovenske-komiksy/>).
  - 28 According to Jelinek, the road trip film genre was not a source of inspiration, but he was influenced by *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola (an updated adaptation of the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad). The use of the motif of a journey, along with the above-mentioned thematic placement of the story into an environment evoking the USA, could also be attributed to Jelinek's day job, where he helped develop the video game *American Truck Simulator*.
  - 29 Cf., for example, the review by Pavel Kořínek “Návrat a znovuzrození Oskara Eda” [The Return and Rebirth of Oskar Ed] with the sub-title “The Best Czechoslovak Graphic Novel of Recent Years” (see <https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2016/19/navrat->

a-znovuzrozeni-oskara-eda), in which he appreciates—among other things—“the exact composition,” “thought-out work with the architecture of the piece” and “the distinct and completely imagined visual treatment.”

- 30 Jelinek published his second Oskar Ed graphic novel with the small independent publisher Lipnik, which is focused exclusively on original Czech comics. During the first ten years of its existence (2008-2018), it published fifteen titles, which rank among the most important pieces of Czech comics art of the last decade. These books feature the work of Vojtěch Mašek (eleven titles in all, six with his artwork and one of which was exclusively his authorial work). The publishing house also includes prominent figures of contemporary Czech comics such as the author Marek Šindelka and the artist Jiří Grus. Lipnik has thus become the leading publisher in contemporary Czech (independent/alternative) comics after the defunct Mot and (as concerns comics production) the less active of late Labyrint.

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Histories of comics frequently mention Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's enthusiasm and admiration of Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer's *Voyages et aventures du Dr. Festus* (1808), but this auspicious beginning did not immediately spark a deluge of German comics. In the intellectual and cultural context of Germany, much of the early history of comics is characterized by a skepticism that the combination of words and images could achieve anything like the status of high art. In the nineteenth century, German comics—or *Bildergeschichte* [picture stories]—consisted of drawings with captions, much like Töpffer's work. Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (1845) and Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz* (1865) used slapstick and black humor to tell cautionary stories with children as the central characters. While Hoffmann's comics emphasized the punishments children would receive for bad behavior, Busch's *Max und Moritz* placed schoolboy pranks at the center of the action; both picture-stories were primarily didactic and aimed at children. This aesthetic was continued in E. O. Plauen's *Vater und Sohn* [Father and son], wordless comics that appeared between 1934-7, the first short German serial with reoccurring characters to be printed in the daily newspaper, *Berliner Illustrierte*. With the rise of National Socialism, independent artistic and satirical culture was radically curtailed with the exception of a few commercial publications and children's books. Nazis controlled cultural production and suppressed any forms of art that were perceived as decadent or not in service to the regime, including comics.

Post-war, German comics history entered a new phase when the German public discovered American comic books from G.I.s, instigating a mass-culture phenomenon. During this period, comics were dominated by imitations of American, French, and Italian genre material: adventure, crime fiction, thrillers, romance. But a number of domestically produced comics gained traction as well, including Manfred Schmidt's (1913-1999) *Nick Knatterton* (1950-1959), the first successful original German comic strip after 1945, which was a popular parody of American detective comics. Other key figures in domestic comics production include Rolf Kauka (1917-2000), creator of Disney-inspired animal comics, publisher Walter Lehning (1904-1971), who translated Italian comics into German as well as launching a number of German adventure comics, and artist Hansrudi Wäscher (born 1928), author of *Nick Weltraumfahrer* [Nick the Space Explorer] and adventure comics.

With the division of Germany into East and West, comics culture split into opposing ideological camps. This rift was exacerbated by the Socialist Unity Party's declaration of the *Verordnung zum Schutz der Jugend* [Regulations for the Protection of Youth] in 1955 which, following Fredric Wertham's warning against the "corrupting" influence in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) in the U.S., forbade the possession, sale, and distribution of Western comics. While West German comics such as Wäscher's strip *Nick Weltraumfahrer* featured plots that represent the protagonist as a fearless individual who overcomes all odds, East German comics emphasized working towards the greater

good and socialist values. Characters in Hannes Hegen's *Digedags*, a popular comic in the German Democratic Republic's state sponsored magazine *Mosaik*, cooperate and work together to surmount obstacles. At the same time, these comics denigrate and mock anything associated with capitalism. Sean Eedy's chapter on *Mosaik* examines in greater detail how the writers of Digedag comics, under pressure from the FDJ [Freie Deutsche Jugend, the East German state youth movement] and against the objections of the original author Hannes Hegen, had to adapt storylines that would best highlight the merits of socialism through adventures in space travel (*Weltraum-Serie*) and the imagined American West (*Amerika-Serie*). Ultimately, in the case of the *Amerika-Serie*, Eedy argues that the representation of America is perhaps more ambivalent than was intended by the party. In a similar vein, Michael Scholz demonstrates how the East German spy comics *Frösi* and *Atze*, also both publications for children but with a more overt ideological agenda, reflected Cold War political tensions, and occasionally allude to real spy cases from the mid-1950s to the end of the GDR in 1989.

Meanwhile, in the Federal Republic of Germany, imports of American comics, both commercial and underground, and European comics, appeared alongside works by West German cartoonists to create a separate comics culture that supported mass-market comics (such as Asterix) as well as independent comics. The magazine *Strapazin*, founded in 1984 in Munich and then relocated to Zurich, was modeled on Spiegelman and Mouly's independent comics magazine *RAW*, and proved an influential platform for alternative comics in German-speaking countries. Following the fall of the Berlin wall, East German artists from fine arts schools brought their avant-garde aesthetic to comics in the reunified Germany. Influenced by Expressionism and printmaking culture in the GDR, these East German artists, including Anke Feuchtenberger, ATAK (Georg Barber), and CX Huth (among others), helped catalyze the emergence of an increasingly vibrant and experimental German comics scene. Central to this new generation of artists were three artistic collectives: PGH Glühende Zukunft [glowing future], Renate, and monogatari. Feminist issues, street art, poster art, international influences, punk, and daily life became the subjects of a new wave of art comics.

An important trend within the expanding field of German comics post-2000 concerns history and historiography. In 2009, which marked the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, three graphic novels narrating histories of the GDR were published. Simon Schwartz's *Drüben!* [The Other Side of the Wall] (2015) recounts his parents' decision to leave East Germany in the 1980s. Claire Lenkova's *Grenzgebiete*, [Border Zone] a children's story book in comic form, helps young readers understand the divided nation that defined their parents' generation. And Flix's (Felix Görmann) *Da war mal was...* [There was once something there...] is a collection of humorous anecdotes from both sides of the Wall. Directed at the generation of young adults who witnessed the collapse of the GDR but were too young to understand the

complexity of their country's separation, these three publications represented the experience of living in East Germany through the eyes of the children that grew up there. They presented the state's oppressive politics and contradictions through anecdotes about growing up in East Germany, while also relating historically accurate facts about life in the GDR through footnotes, thus launching a movement that has since evolved into a new genre of the German graphic novel. Today, there are over a dozen graphic novels that retell the history of the GDR, with more coming out each year. The third contribution to the German section, by Biz Nijdam, focuses on a case study of the comic *Berlin–Geteilte Stadt* [Berlin–Divided City, 2012] by Thomas Henseler and Susanne Buddenberg which recounts five personal narratives about the Berlin Wall on the basis of interviews and an archive of documentary materials. Of all the numerous graphic narratives produced about the wall, she is particularly interested in the way *Berlin–Geteilte Stadt* functions as a form of comics historiography by foregrounding its documentary status through drawings of objects, photos, and maps, as well as a bibliography and extensive contextual notes.

German comics are supported and promoted by a network of festivals in Germany and adjacent German-speaking countries. Founded in 1984, the earliest and longest running festival takes place in Erlangen biennially, and has had an impressive international roster of comics artists including Art Spiegelman, Moebius, and Jacques Tardi. Other, smaller-scale comics festivals are held in Munich, and Comicsfestival Hamburg, entirely run by volunteers, features alternative and independent European cartoonists. Outside of Germany, the Fumetto festival in Lucerne, Switzerland, has been running since 1992, and the more recent Next Comicfestival (founded in 2009) in Linz Austria attracts visitors 25,000 annually.

Although comics culture has developed over several years through comics festivals, the recognition of comics as an artform and as a subject of academic study has been somewhat slower. ComFor, *Gesellschaft für Comicforschung* [Society for Comics Studies], was founded in 2005 in Koblenz and is linked with the Bonner online bibliography for comics studies and the British-based Comics Forum.<sup>1</sup> The society maintains a website with information on international comics conferences, and holds its own conference on an annual basis. Histories of comics and exhibit catalogues have been gradually growing in number, however, beginning with Bernd Dolle-Weinkauff's *Comics: Geschichte einer populären Literaturform in Deutschland seit 1945* [Comics: History of a popular literary form in Germany since 1945] (1990), followed by *Comics made in Germany: 60 Jahre Comics aus Deutschland 1947 – 2007* [60 Years of Comics from Germany] (2008). There have been several important shows featuring comics, including *Mutanten: die deutschsprachige Comic-Avantgarde der 90er Jahre* [Mutants: the German-language Comic Avant-garde of the 1990s] (1999), a traveling exhibit organized by the Goethe Institute titled *Comics, Manga & Co.: die neue deutsche Comic-Kultur* [Comics, Manga & Co: the new German Comics Culture] (2010), and an exhibit at Berlin House: *Comics aus Berlin: Bilder einer Stadt*

[Comics from Berlin: Pictures of a City] (2013). To date, there is one book on German comics available in English: *Novel Perspectives on German-Language Comics Studies: History, Pedagogy, Theory* (2016), edited by Lynn Marie Kutch.

## Note

- 1 The international comics bibliography is maintained at [www.comicforschung.uni-bonn.de](http://www.comicforschung.uni-bonn.de), and there are English-language summaries of ComFor's work on the British Comics Forum website, [comicsforum.org](http://comicsforum.org).

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Sean Eedy

## Co-Opting Childhood and Obscuring Ideology in *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen, 1959-1974*

The implementation of socialist realism, an accessible rendering of proletarian experience, as the state-sanctioned artistic style at the writer's conference in the East German industrial town of Bitterfeld (1959) and the construction of the Berlin Wall two years later (1961) transformed comic books published in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Following these events, editors, educators, and the Free German Youth (FDJ) demanded the overhaul of *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen* (Mosaic by Hannes Hegen, henceforth *Mosaik*) and *Atze* to foreground educational and ideological components and fend off the imperialist influence of the Walt Disney comics popular in West Germany. As such, children's publications combined with state ideology to enable the politicization of the supposed ideology free-zone of the domestic, private sphere. In 1966, the FDJ wrote that, although a fundamentally new direction for *Mosaik* was impossible due to the peculiarities of its content, the comic required substantial improvement as the motivations of the main characters must be firmly demonstrated, in word and deed, to aid the poor and exploited against the ruling class and their lackeys (BArch DY 24-1585 60).<sup>1</sup> Of course, this does not suggest that ideological and propagandistic content was absent from East German comics prior to this. Rather, the Berlin Wall put children's development in the hands of educators, superficially at least, and aspired to create the desired "socialist personality:" respect for the collective way of life, social engagement, and a belief in the Marxist worldview of historical and economic developments (Wierling 157). Adopted and adapted from Soviet pedagogy, this approach to children's development in the GDR was emblematic of socialist education in the early 1960s and dominated the FDJ's youth policy (Saunders 11-12).

In mid-1955, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) issued the *Verordnung zum Schutz der Jugend* [Regulations for the Protection of Youth], banning the possession, sale, and distribution of western comics. Tightening of the inner-German border in the late



1950s and the Berlin Wall in 1961 created a seemingly impermeable barrier between children and western comics and culture. However, neither this apparent lack of access to western comics, nor the FDJ's focus on ideological education, discouraged children's desire for comics. Only three months after the regulations were issued, *Mosaik* launched with an initial print run of 150,000. By the third issue, this number increased to 250,000 copies and by 1962-63 print runs surpassed 300,000 copies per month (Lettkemann and Scholz 26, 35). Despite this, authorities thought the comic resembled the *Schundliteratur* [trashy literature] characteristic of western comic publications, too closely echoing the Disney comics from which their creator(s) drew inspiration. (Jo)Hannes Hegen(barth) and his staff at the *Mosaikkollektiv* [*Mosaik* collective], established in 1957 to assist Hegen as the comic transitioned from a quarterly to monthly publication schedule (BArch DY 26-114), were accused of having bourgeois backgrounds, potentially posing a threat to East German socialism. *Mosaik* was thus threatened with cancellation over its perceived lack of socialist ideological content (BStU, MfS, HA II Abt. 3, AP, Nr. 10321/64).<sup>2</sup> The debut of the *Amerika-Serie* in 1969, however, saw the state-run publisher expand *Mosaik's* production with renewed educational focus appropriate to the construction of socialism and the representation of working-class experience. The conflation of the FDJ's educational, ideological control and readers' continued desire for comics provided the regime an opportunity to include state-sanctioned propaganda in the otherwise compartmentalized niche of the domestic space.

While the primary objective of East German comic publications was to entertain, the regime increasingly understood the importance and capacity of comics to develop the socialist personalities necessary for the perpetuation of the East German state. This essay looks to stories published in *Mosaik* with an eye toward the ways in which the FDJ and the editorial regime harnessed the interests of children, and East German society broadly, to promote the state's ideological agenda. In its own way, *Mosaik* was every bit as ideological as its counterpart, *Atze*. However, *Mosaik* concealed its ideological content in the palatable form of the fantastic adventures of its protagonists. *Mosaik* thus gave the impression of the absence of socialist ideology, allowing for the penetration of the domestic niche. Though this perceived lack of overt ideological content drew the ire of the publisher and editors, that same perception afforded *Mosaik* a degree of popularity with a readership more interested in entertainment than education, unmatched by *Atze's* undisguised ideological machinations.

Notably under discussion here are the *Weltraum-* [outer-space] and *Amerika-Serie* beginning in 1958 and 1969, respectively. American literary scholar Catrin Gersdorf argues that the FDJ considered the stories and settings in *Mosaik*, prior to the *Amerika-Serie*, incapable of adequately depicting socialist class struggle (36). The *Amerika-Serie* drew on long-standing ideas about the frontier and the American West in the (East)

German imaginary, particularly the inversion of the cowboy/Indian dynamic present in the novels of nineteenth century German author, Karl May, and *Indianerfilme* [“Red Western films”] popular throughout the Soviet Bloc. Similarly, the *Weltraum-Serie* demonstrated a previously unseen level of ideology compared to early issues written by Hegen himself. Published a few months after the successful launch of the Soviet *Sputnik 1* satellite in October 1957, the *Weltraum-Serie* exploited recent interest in space exploration and East Germany’s fascination with science fiction, modernity, and technology in service of the state. Nor were these preoccupations limited to the GDR. Benita Blessing suggests that the Soviets believed children were better served by entertainment reflecting school subjects, like outer space and atomic energy as indicators of Soviet superiority, as opposed to the fantasies dominating children’s media (253). Significantly, the FDJ encouraged linkages between comics and the classroom (BArch DY 24-23769) and, like their western European and American counterparts, these comics formed part of the supposed “free” time arguably left unorganized and unmonitored by the state. This provided comics the ability to act and educate on the FDJ’s behalf in the perceived regime-free space of the private sphere, though this was only partially accepted by the readership.

## The Space Race, Technology, and the Cold War

**M**osaik’s first stories saw the *Digedags*, collectively referring to Mosaik’s goblin-like trio of Dig, Dag, and Digedag, in the South Seas, aboard pirate ships, visiting Imperial Rome, and finally bringing them to a rocket ship landed in the middle of the desert. Created by Hegen in 1955 and written and illustrated by him until the formation of the *Mosaikkollektiv* two years later, these characters provided *Verlag Neues Leben* [New Life Publishing] with an alternative to the Disney comics popular in both halves of divided Germany (Pfeiffer 128). Reflecting an art style combining that of Disney (Pfeiffer 127 and Gersdorf 36) with elements of the Belgian Marcinelle School, notable for *Asterix* later in the decade, the *Digedags* were physically similar, though differentiated by their respective heights, hair color, and the shape of their bulbous noses (BArch DY 26-173). Together, they were emblematic of the (East) German tricolor: Dig, the shortest and most rotund, had black hair; Dag, of middle height, was blonde; while Digedag, the tallest of the three, was a redhead. The *Digedags* remained the primary characters in *Mosaik* until Hegen left the publication in 1974, taking those characters with him, following the *Amerika-Serie* (BArch DC 26-114).

The *Weltraum-Serie* began in December 1958 as Dig, Dag, and their travelling companion, Sinus Tangentus, a scrawny, bald Roman wearing philosopher’s robes and whose name refers to trigonometric functions indicative of his knowledge of math and science, are whisked off into space. Whereas the *Digedags* hobnobbed with royalty

and hunted treasure in earlier stories, not entirely unlike Disney's Uncle Scrooge and his nephews after whose adventures the *Digedags* were modelled (Barch DY 26-173), the *Weltraum-Serie* was a concerted effort by the *Mosaikkollektiv* to incorporate state ideology before the *Bitterfelder Weg* [Bitterfeld Way], the policy emerging from the Bitterfeld conference to develop a new national socialist culture emblematic of worker experience, made it mandate.

In this first issue of the *Weltraum-Serie*, there is a celebration of engineering and science consistent with the perceived technology cult and the pride of place enjoyed by modernity in East Germany and throughout the Soviet Bloc, suggested by historian Eli Rubin (32). Dolores Augustine similarly argues that *Mosaik* presented technological development as the higher purpose of socialism, performed with the comic's central idealism (244). Importantly, the comic makes obvious to the *Digedags*, and thus the child-readership, the operation and possibilities of space and interstellar travel with, as Augustine describes, "textbook-like explanations" (232). This explanation begins almost as soon as the *Digedags* board the spaceship [*Raumschiff*]. Prior to brief introductions to the captain and Bhur Yham, a head-scientist aboard the craft described later as "Unserer bester Mann" [our best man], from the planet Neos, an accident leads Dig, Dag, and Sinus to explanations of a fire extinguisher's rocket-like effects in zero gravity. Compared to Yham, himself appearing of possible Asian descent, the ship's captain is more noticeably of Middle-Eastern ancestry while background characters are predominantly Caucasian, suggesting the internationality of Neos', and thus communist, society. The readers are given a tour of the ship via a splash page featuring a cutaway drawing of crew quarters and activities within. Meanwhile, the protagonists are told of their pending journey to the moon to replace atmospheric samples accidentally destroyed by the fire extinguisher when the *Digedags* first boarded (Hegen, "Die Entführung ins All" [The Abduction into Space] 9, 10).

Sinus explains the theory of space and the heavens advanced by Greek astronomer, Ptolemy. With the aid of an onion, Sinus tells the *Digedags*, and the reader, that space is comprised of seven shells [*Schalen*], like the layers of that onion, with the earth at its center (Hegen, "Die Entführung ins All" 12). Of course, this explanation clashes with scientific understandings of the universe held by Soviet Bloc states, East Germany included. As the spaceship employs technology strikingly similar to that possessed by the GDR (Augustine 232), the space-faring aliens from Neos are indicative of socialist modernity confronted with the backwardness of Sinus' ancient Greco-Roman thinking. Here, the *Weltraum-Serie* resembles earlier Russian science fiction such as Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1908) and the Stalinist-era "close aim" fiction favoring industrial production in the not-too-distant future. In Soviet children's literature, these tropes appear at least as early as Innokenty Zhukov's *Voyage of the Red Star Pioneer Troop to Wonderland* in 1924. Stylistically, this was maintained in the GDR into the 1980s as the *Weltraum-Serie's* story seemingly inspired *Ein Planet wird*

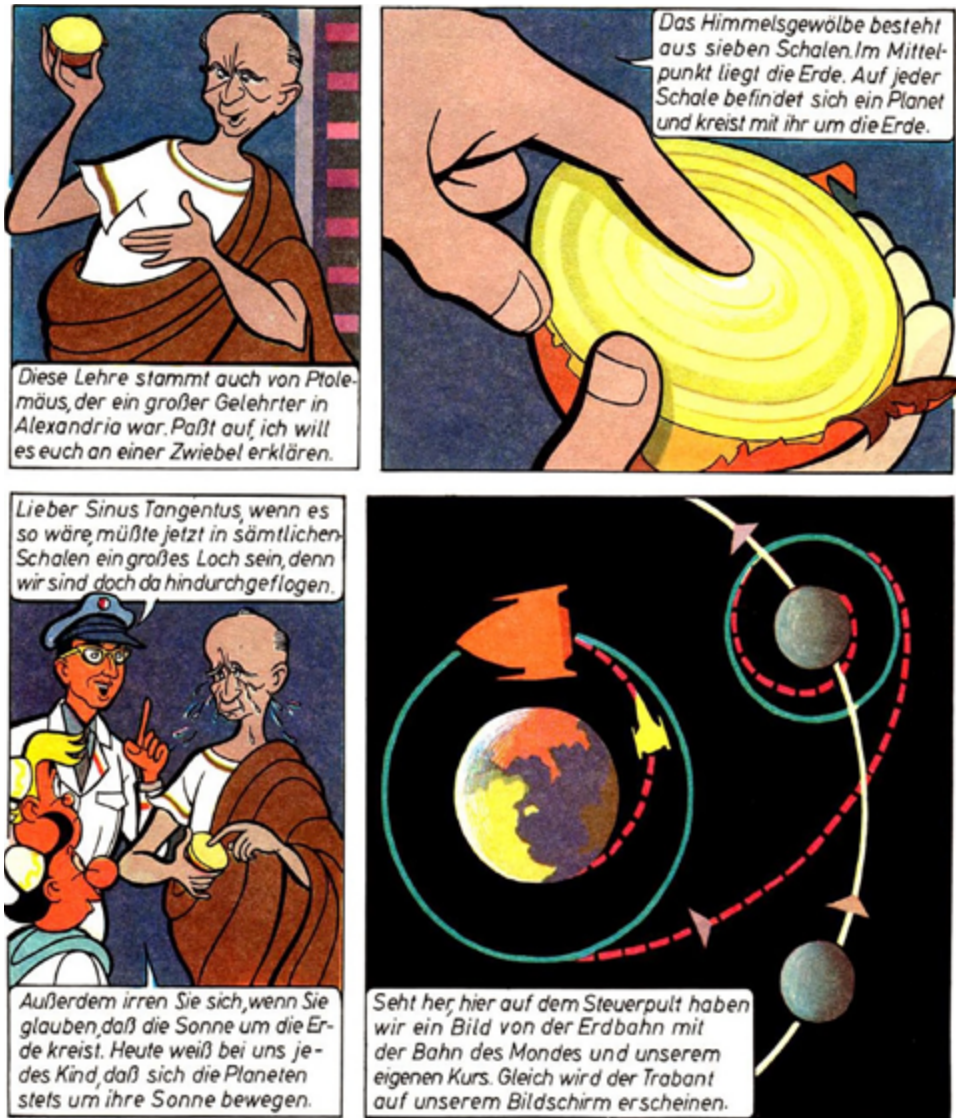


Fig. 1. Sinus and Yham discuss opposing theories of the universe, *Die Entführung ins All* [The Abduction into Space], p. 16, from *Mosaik* by Hannes Hegen, ©Tessloff Verlag, Nürnberg, Germany.

*gesucht* [A Sought-After Planet] by popular cartoonist Erich Schmitt, published in *Freie Welt* [Free World] magazine between March 1981 and June 1982 (Pfeiffer 95). David Wittenberg argues that nineteenth century utopian fiction, from which socialist science fiction drew influence, modelled the future after a Darwinian evolution of the present, suggesting forward momentum toward societal improvement, not unlike Marxist theories of social development (30). Sinus is thus taken aback, crying from

the cut onion and deconstruction of his ideas, when Yham tells him that if Ptolemy's theory was true there should be holes in the shells through which they flew. Yham continues, condescendingly, that Sinus' belief in the Sun revolving around the Earth is mistaken, since even children know planets orbit the Sun (Hegen, "Die Entführung ins All" 12) (Fig. 1).

More than either Sinus or the *Digedags*, Yham's statement was intended for children reading *Mosaik*. Even before the requirements of the *Bitterfelder Weg*, magazines, newspapers, and comics were tasked with educating children for the progress of humanity and humanism, socialism and communism (BArch DY 26-173). Moreover, most Germans, both East and West, were convinced the Soviets could never achieve victory in the Space Race without German engineering (Geyer 128). This belief propelled the popularity of space and science fiction among East German children (Lettkemann 357). Having Yham indirectly address the readership, convinced that all children are familiar with scientific fact, played to this societal popularity and the assumption of FDJ educators that children should be interested and entertained by subjects like outer space and atomic energy that demarcated socialist modernity. As such, educators established connections between material studied in the East German classroom and the entertainment consumed by children in the time left unorganized by youth groups and state sanctioned activities. Likewise, as *Mosaik* and contemporary children's publications in the GDR were aimed at children whose ages coincided with membership in the Thälmann Pioneers (BArch DY 26-42), tapping into the science fiction genre, particularly at this juncture in Soviet history and the Space Race with the United States, provided educators opportunity to promote ideological concerns in seemingly innocuous forms of entertainment.

In so doing, *Mosaik's Weltraum-Serie* was demonstrative of utopian narratives typical of socialist and Soviet science fiction and required by socialist realism after the *Bitterfelder Weg*.<sup>3</sup> By both its nature and connection to socialist realism, utopian (science) fiction demonstrated the inhumane character of capitalist imperialism, foregrounding socialism's progressive superiority (Darnton 167-168). Maintaining the perceived educational emphasis of GDR comics, *Mosaik* introduced the *Digedags* to an interstellar Cold War between Neos and what this first issue describes as a "feindlichen Macht" [fiendish power] (Hegen, "Die Entführung ins All" 19). Indeed, while the *Digedags*, Sinus, and Yham are on the lunar surface gathering samples and an education in the effects of reduced gravity, the ship's captain reveals himself as a spy for this same fiendish power. Expressing trepidation at the prospect of discovery and punishment, the captain attempts to launch the spaceship to complete his mission, abandoning those characters in the process (Hegen, "Die Entführung ins All" 19-20). The captain's duplicity is not discovered here; instead, he is incapacitated by an apologetic crewman. His insistence to launch the spacecraft, despite crewmembers' protests, is ascribed to space fever [*Raumkoller*]. This diagnosis is not entirely inaccurate as the captain is

metaphorically sick, nervous, and irrational under the influence of western capitalism and is thus unable to act with the best intentions or in harmony with the “progressive power of revolutionary tradition” that marked utopian fiction (Darnton 168).

The introduction of threats of this kind, particularly espionage, was not unique to *Mosaik* and, like the tropes of utopian fiction, was common to GDR comics well after their appearance in the *Weltraum-Serie*. The September 1979 issue of *Atze* featured the political story, “Vom Hackenpflug zur E-Lok” [From Plows to Streetcars] by Günther Hain, in which a West German agent was caught stealing equipment from East German factories rebuilt following World War II (7). This celebrated socialist achievement, but also made children aware of the perceived need for vigilance against western saboteurs, spies, and thieves seeking to dismantle East German socialism that citizens and the SED built. This is but one example of the threat posed by imperialists in East German comics. Elsewhere in this volume, Michael Scholz provides an insightful analysis of episodes of this very subject in the children’s magazines *Atze* and *Frösi*.

### **America in the (East) German Imaginary**

Just as science fiction was popular among youth and the driving force behind the *Weltraum-Serie* (Darnton 167), so too were stories of the American West. The notion of the “Wild West” was not only popular among children and East German *Indianistik* role-play groups but proved ideologically acceptable to the SED as there was ample evidence to cast indigenous Americans as “victims of American capitalism and colonialism” (Reagin 567) in these narratives. Drawing inspiration from the writings of Mark Twain, Jack London, and Karl May, the ideological-propagandistic thrust of the *Amerika-Serie* displayed the evils associated with “die Entwicklung eines typischen kapitalistischen Landes” [the development of a typical capitalist country] and the heroism of workers clearing the land and building the railroads eventually uniting the country (BArch DC 9-1628).

The *Weltraum-Serie* a decade earlier was, to that point, the most ideological story in *Mosaik*. That story was, however, insufficient despite Cold War allegories and the triumph of East German modernity for the technological future (Augustine 232) as the trappings of utopian fiction prevented Cold War metaphors from becoming more than that, without open and direct comparison between socialism and capitalism. Before the mid-1960s, Hegen was unwilling to include “patronizing” and heavy-handed ideological discussions in *Mosaik* (Lettkemann and Scholz 40). This garnered complaints from the FDJ’s Central Committee over the supposedly bourgeois associations kept by the *Digedags* (BArch DY 24-1585) and changed only as Hegen’s authority within the *Mosaikkollektiv* diminished under Wolfgang Altenburger’s editorial guidance (Lettkemann and Scholz 40). By 1966, the FDJ made it clear that



**Fig. 2.** Colonel Springfield attacks the editor of *New Orleans Magazine* as “illustrated” by *Die digedags in Amerika*, p. 12, from *Mosaik* by Hannes Hegen, ©Tessloff Verlag, Nürnberg, Germany.

the locale for the *Digedags'* future adventures needed to be transposed to the towns and villages among the laboring proletariat (BArch DY 24-1585) they were intended to represent and defend. Whereas the *Weltraum-Serie* thrust the *Digedags* into an analogue for the Earth-bound Cold War, the dichotomy between non-unionized workers and managers, slaves and owners, American Indigenes and an imperialistic government during the pre-Civil War development of the United States made America seem the best location for this ideological battle. Although the original conceptualization for the *Amerika-Serie* envisioned placing it in the years following the Civil War to demonstrate problems facing African-Americans despite the abolition of slavery and celebrate the workers' completion of the transcontinental railway (BArch DC 9-1628), they ultimately decided to set the story in the year before the war (Hegen “Karneval in New Orleans” 2), establishing conflict as the ultimate outcome of capitalism.

As the *Amerika-Serie* opens, the *Digedags* work as reporters for *New Orleans Magazine*. The opening narration offers a brief background on recent American history, including the impact of the 1848 gold rush and American expansionism on

the indigenous peoples while also drawing comparisons between southern slavery and the North's exploitation of European immigrant laborers in the factories. Casting the *Digedags* as reporters put them in the center of the story's action, not unlike the Belgian character Tintin by Hergé or Ivan Semenov's Soviet world traveler Petia Ryzhik (Alaniz 65), providing reason to explore and comment on the state of American society (Hegen, "Karneval in New Orleans" 2). This works well in terms of the requirements made clear by the FDJ and Altenburger, affording the *Digedags* a straightforward motivation and purpose to act in service to the poor and exploited, immigrant laborers, slaves, and the indigenous people they encountered. This setting removed the *Digedags* from the royal courts, dropping them squarely in America's development as a modern state evidenced by the railroads guiding the *Digedags* across the country and the heroization of the (American) workers that coincided with developing industrial production. Further, the *Digedags'* journey gave children a sense of technology's role in a modern state, which the GDR most certainly was (BArch DY 24-1585). The combination of ideological and story elements in the *Amerika-Serie* provided readers a depiction of class struggle that was largely indirect or indiscernible in early issues under Hegen's direction (BArch DY 26-173) (Fig. 2).

But *Mosaik's* primary obligation, despite FDJ requirements to the comic's educational, informative aspects, was to produce entertaining stories for children (BArch DY 26-42), satiating their hunger for comics that the FDJ recognized and harnessed (BArch DY 26-173). As a result, the first issue of the *Amerika-Serie* introduced the *Digedags* to Colonel Springfield, a visual mixture of the American symbolic figure Uncle Sam and the gunfighter "Wild Bill" Hickok, as a former military man reveling in past glory. However, Springfield is quickly revealed to be a buffoon as he bullies the magazine editor, Mr. Potter, because of an unflattering story printed in a recent issue (Hegen, "Karneval in New Orleans" 5-8). For readers, Springfield provided physical humor the *Digedags* themselves could not given their roles as the comic's protagonists and socialist emissaries. That said, though the character does not appear in every issue, Springfield immediately foregrounds the ideological underpinnings of the *Amerika-Serie* even if those objectives escaped the average reader. The character is oafish, clumsy, a bully, easily offended, and quick to draw pistols. Given Springfield's visual similarities to Uncle Sam, popularized by the 1917 "I Want You" US Army recruiting poster, the character was broadly indicative of East German and socialist views of America (Gersdorf 42). Indeed, in the conceptualization of the series, the FDJ suggests that "Spekulation, Betrug, Erpressung und Gewalt, Landraub, Rassenhetze und journalistische Sensationsmache, das sind einige der Mittel, denen sich die nordamerikanischen Ausbeuter bedienen, um noch reicher und mächtiger zu werden" [speculation, fraud, extortion and violence, land grabs, race-baiting and journalistic sensationalism...are some of the means by which North American exploiters become richer and more powerful] (BArch DC 9-1628) over the workers



and farmers as evidenced through Springfield's character. Embodying many of these principles, Colonel Springfield placed American imperialism in stark relief with the lived experience of "real existing socialism" in the GDR and throughout the Soviet Bloc, addressing some of East German educators' earliest criticisms against the comic. And yet, the *Amerika-Serie* still provided fantasy adorned with the cultural touchstones understood by children and, as such, had more in common with Karl May's Winnetou western novels, originally published between 1875 and 1910, and the western European and American comics on which it was modelled than other children's literary styles preferred by the regime (Prager 364).

Observed through the first-person narration of his German blood-brother, Old Shatterhand, Winnetou was an Apache chief in May's novels. May flipped traditional western narratives by depicting indigenous Americans as romantic figures and "freedom loving heroes" (Penny 4) struggling against American expansionism represented by the presence of settlers, gunslingers, and the military. Not only did these novels inspire *Indianistik* hobbyists in East Germany (Reagin 567), but the inversion of the cowboy/Indian dynamic perhaps explained SED Secretary Erich Honecker's (1971-1989) own interest in May's writings (Darnton 168). Moreover, the socialist subtext of the *Indianerfilme* popular in the GDR themselves were often influenced by May's work, and further upended the cowboy/Indian dynamic that arguably defined the genre. *Mosaik* likewise characterized indigenous populations as victims of American westward imperialism, cheated of their land by railroad companies, prospectors, and gunslingers (BArch DC 9-1628), stoic defenders against the encroaching threat posed by the United States. The *Digedags* befriended these victimized people, to say nothing of the slaves and farmers equally beleaguered, in the FDJ's estimation, by capitalist exploiters (BArch DC 9-1628). In doing so, *Mosaik* made the comic book version of America and its people palatable to the SED regime, despite the fact that these narratives sometimes ran contrary to socialist ideology.

Gersdorf suggests that the *Amerika-Serie* by its nature, positioning East and West in such close comparison and in the fantastical style afforded by the comics medium, told a fictional story with enough historical accuracy to invert perceptions of the United States as the enemy. Although the comic makes clear its "socialist world view and morality" as the backdrop for the series, *Mosaik* demonstrated America to be a place of "adventure, fun, and ardent desires...that is counterproductive to a politically motivated reduction of the U.S. to...the political, economic and military imperialism of the American state" (Gersdorf 42). In "Die Grosse Herausforderung" [The Great Challenge], for example, two black women, servants mopping the floor, cause Springfield to slip and fall. However, Springfield slides into an adjacent room where he quickly recovers to join the military men within (Hegen "Die Grosse Herausforderung" 8-10). This reversal challenges socialist notions of capitalism's inevitable end and, as Gersdorf concludes, suggests a deconstruction of "the erroneous thesis that

capitalism...is about to be discharged from world history” (42) through a combination of humor and the symbolic coding of Springfield’s character. Nonetheless, this afforded *Mosaik*, especially the *Amerika-Serie*, an opportunity to appeal to children in a way unavailable to other, more overtly ideological children’s publications.

While *Mosaik* was almost immediately popular with children (BArch DY 26-173), *Atze*, one of the few other comics published in the GDR, was often criticized for its inability to capture a dedicated younger audience (BArch DY 24-1581). *Atze* was indeed the more politically-minded of the two comics and suffered a decided lack of popularity until Altenburger, *Mosaik*’s editor-in-chief, was hired to correct the publication in the mid-1960s. The incorporation of new stories like *Pats Reiseabenteuer* [Pat’s Adventurous Journey], written by Altenburger himself and echoing elements of *Mosaik*, helped to significantly increase readership (BSTU, MfS, HA XX, Nr. 11285). Even so, *Atze* required political stories alongside the more humorous likes of *Pats Reiseabenteuer* and *Fix und Fax*, the FDJ claiming that children who desired *Fix und Fax* had to accept half an issue of propaganda (“Propaganda in ‘Atze’”).<sup>4</sup> In this, the FDJ happily provided children with their desired *Fix und Fax* strips, but included the political content largely, though not entirely, absent from the strip to elevate *Atze* above the level of *Schundliteratur*. Placating readers’ expressed interests created a base for the comic and gave the FDJ a platform for its socialist ideology. The political stories were often biographies of socialist leaders and episodes of wartime anti-fascist resistance written with a serious, reverent tone accompanied by art that typically favored realism over the cartoonish caricatures of *Mosaik* (BArch DY 24-1581).

“Schwarza-Geschichten I” [Schwarza Stories I] by Bernd Günther (*Atze* 10/1984) is one example of these types of political narratives. The comic recounts anti-fascist resistance in a concentration camp located in eastern Germany and the nearby urban district of Schwarza in Rudolstadt, Thuringia, rebuilding its industry after World War II.<sup>5</sup> Here, the American arrival is cast in the same light as the Nazi occupation and the town is only truly liberated by the Soviet Red Army (Günther 2-7 and 10-11). Likewise, Günther Hain’s “Abschied mit Bitternis” [Bitter Farewell] (*Atze* 9/1984), describes East German friendship, education, and relief efforts in Grenada prior to the United States’ 1983 invasion, ironically similar to the imperialism against which socialism claimed to fight and indicative of the Cold War spread of political ideologies (2-7). In both instances, the authors lay socialism and capitalism side by side, not unlike comparisons made in the *Amerika-Serie*. *Atze*, however, does not undercut the message in these stories with analogy and humor like *Mosaik*. Because of *Atze*’s socialist realist aesthetic in the political stories and despite the FDJ’s insistence on their inclusion, these were the stories most overlooked by children. Of course, this does not suggest the child-readership avoided these stories altogether. Rather, in their letters to the editors, the political stories are often left unmentioned in favor of *Pats Reiseabenteuer* and *Fix und Fax* (BArch DY 24-23769). But given the wide distribution of *Atze* (BArch DY 26-42), it is

difficult to believe these stories were entirely ignored, which indicates the penetration of the domestic sphere by the overt state influence denied by conceptualizations of the GDR's niche society (Saunders 10).

## Conclusion

In the early 1980s, the West German Permanent Representative to the GDR, Günter Gaus, observed that East German citizens sheltered themselves from the sphere of official political culture and created “stability and identity” in private, domestic space, or “private niches” as he terms them (Saunders 10). Western journalist Theo Sommer noted similar trends, though in much more nebulous forms, dating back at least as far as his visit to the East in 1964 (19). And comics had the potential to occupy the domestic niche that was supposedly free of state influence. Although these private niches afforded some independence in constructions of GDR identity, this argument fails to recognize, intentionally or otherwise, the interference of the state in daily life, including encounters with the *Staatssicherheit*, or *Stasi* [state security], and thus the notion of a space entirely free of ideological influence was largely an illusion (Saunders 4-11). Children brought comics into the home to be read in their free time, and the ideology contained therein occupied their thoughts, if only briefly, while those comics were read. Indeed, Augustine suggests that many of *Mosaik's* readers considered the comic free of socialist ideology (230), rendering the comics' educational agenda palatable, though still present, to readers. Moreover, comics were considered a media consumed only by children to be outgrown before reaching adulthood and were thus often dismissed (Barker 240). In the GDR, this was marked by the child's transition from the Thälmann Pioneers to the FDJ, demarcating the intended age-range for these publications (BArch DY 26-173). However, comics' popularity in Germany during the immediate postwar drew the FDJ's attention and, by the mid-1950s, comics were incorporated into the East German educational regime, expanding their ideological content after the implementation of the *Bitterfelder Weg* in 1959. This was most noticeable in *Atze* with the introduction of realistic, political stories of socialist martyrs and anti-fascist heroes in the mid- to late-1960s. Although these stories entertained children, *Atze's* editors had no qualms about its socialist content or the purpose behind these stories.

The otherwise innocuous *Weltraum-* and *Amerika-Serie*, published in the ideologically understated *Mosaik* in 1958-1962 and 1969-1974 respectively, drew on the enduring popularity of German travel stories, science fiction, and American-style westerns. While the *Weltraum-Serie* built itself around the utopian fiction popular among socialist youth throughout the Soviet Bloc, it lacked sufficient ideological content to satisfy either the FDJ or GDR educators as the Cold War analogy was not appropriately and instantly recognizable or relatable to working-

class experience. Published a decade later, the *Amerika-Serie* attempted something similar. Employing the near ubiquitous popularity of the American Old West and indigenous Americans, the *Amerika-Serie* located the *Digedags* in a setting allowing direct comparison with the perceived imperialist enemy as they befriended those very classes supposedly represented by the workers and farmers state. Nor was this the only time the FDJ and children's publications used these tropes. In 1983, the publishers of *Frösi* hosted the *Frösi-treff* [Meet up with *Frösi*] as a variety show and opportunity for children to interact with the magazine's cartoonists. Both Sigmund Jähn, the GDR's first Cosmonaut aboard the Soviet rocket *Soyuz* [Union] 31 in 1978, and Gojko Mitić, the Serbian actor in numerous *Indianerfilme* as the indigenous hero, appeared in some form, setting the show's tone. The program included singing, dancing, and the chance for children to design their own *Frösi* character, interspersed with segments testing children's knowledge of GDR history or else engaging with a more overt political bent (BArch DC 207-686).

Allusions to science fiction and the American West obfuscated the required ideological components, drawing inspiration from aspects of the popular consciousness already attractive to children and youth. In the case of indigenous Americans, there was a long tradition of interest in the American frontier that directly influenced the *Amerika-Serie*, *Indianerfilme*, and *Indianistik* role-play groups, appropriately and correctly recasting indigenous people as victims of American expansion. These points of influence captivated and capitalized on a young comics readership, providing the state access to the organization of children's "free" time. Moreover, comics, *Mosaik* in particular, were perceived to be free from the conspicuous propaganda characterizing most media in the Soviet Bloc and, in doing so, rendered these publications acceptable, if not entirely invisible, to the domestic sphere as a supposed ideological-free zone.

## Notes

- 1 This and similar, subsequent references are from the *Bundesarchiv* (BArch) Berlin-Lichterfelde.
- 2 This and similar, subsequent references are from *Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatsicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (BStU) [Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic].
- 3 For a larger discussion of science fiction in the GDR than I can provide here, see Sonja Fritsche's monograph, *Science Fiction Literature in East Germany*.
- 4 *Fix und Fax* was an East German comic strip created by Jürgen Kieser in 1958 and featured in *Atze*.

- 5 Although the concentration camp in the story is unnamed, it is most likely *KZ-Außenlager Laura*, a subcamp of Buchenwald, local to Rudolstadt where the story is based.

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# Michael F. Scholz

## Images of Spies and Counterspies in East German Comics

Spies and spy rings regularly appeared in comic strips and comic books during the Second World War, however, they seemed to lose their attraction following the defeat of Hitler and fascism—but not for long (Lee 2012). With the advent of the Cold War, stories about spies and counterspies would regain their popularity. This was a truly international phenomenon that swept both capitalist and socialist countries. Even in East Germany (GDR), comics contained a great variety of espionage stories. They pushed social agendas involving war and national liberation movements; some stories even purported to reveal true spy cases. Studying these comics fills a gap between governmental propaganda and everyday life, and provides a wider understanding and awareness of the hidden and open ideological messages that reached and influenced particularly the younger generation during the Cold War.

Using comics in their battle for hearts and minds is not confined to socialist state propaganda alone. Governments have done so for more than a hundred years; cultural, political, and social messages have been spread in and by comic strips and comic books, psychologically targeted at both children and young adults (Manning and Romerstein 61-63; Duncan and Smith; Graham). Since comics reflect the time in which they are created, they can be considered as historical sources, deserving attention from different disciplines, and especially from historians (Scholz 1990; Scholz 2010, “Comics als Quelle;” Scholz 2017).

Surprisingly, we can find comics even in the socialist GDR. But they were called *Bildgeschichten* [picture stories], in order to differentiate them from similar, Western publications. They started as a defensive reaction against Western comics (Chowanetz; Scholz 2008; Jovanovich and Koch). The initiative came from the East German Writers’ Association, as a “measure against trashy and obscene literature.” It was the well-known writer, Ludwig Renn (1889-1979), who proposed to counter “so-called comics” not only by banning them but also through the “manufacturing of superficially similar



products,” which he wanted to call “picture stories.” In fact, his idea was a result of his former visit to the People’s Republic of China, where he discovered how Chinese picture stories played a central role as pedagogical tools in the service of culture and politics (Scholz 2001, 163-65).

In 1953, the youth magazine *Fröhlich sein und Singen (Frösi)* [Be Happy and Sing] was launched, and contained a significant number of comics. However, more important were two magazines consisting only of comics, so-called *Bilderzeitschriften* [picture newspapers], begun in 1955: *Atze* [Pal] and *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen* [Mosaic by Hannes Hegen]. In its first years, *Atze* was issued as a sister publication of the weekly *Der Junge Pionier* [The Young Scout]<sup>1</sup> and was even supervised by the same editorial staff. Until 1990, the official publisher of *Atze* was the Central Council of the Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend, FDJ), the state youth movement in East Germany. *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen*, by contrast, appeared as a relatively independent publication, and would eventually occupy a special place in the spectrum of East German media (Lehmstedt). It did not take long for the medium in general to be used as an instrument for socialist propaganda. The “educational value” was obvious; in contrast to other publications for children and young adults, comics were simple and quickly consumed. Even as non-mandatory reading, they reached a large readership in East Germany.<sup>2</sup>

By presenting and analyzing image and text examples from East German spy stories, published between 1954 and 1989, I will show how mass media in the GDR, controlled by the communist party and communist youth organisations, used comics as a means of state and party propaganda (Scholz 2001). Examining these comics can lead to insights into how and with what degree of success the socialist ideology resonated in popular culture. This study will concentrate on *Frösi* and *Atze*: *Frösi* with a monthly circulation of 150,000 in 1954, increasing to 300,000 the following year, and *Atze* with a constant circulation of around 450,000, both produced by the Verlag Junge Welt (Young World Publishers), the publishing arm of the Central Council of the Free German Youth (Grünberg; Kramer).

## **Spies and Counterspies in the East German Funnies in the 1950s**

Following the 1953 June uprising against an intensified process of Sovietisation, the communist regime in the GDR was forced to provide more entertainment for its people and offer alternatives to cultural products from West Germany. This was the motivation behind the publication of new magazines for younger people, including comic magazines. It is not surprising, therefore, that initially humor strips dominated the comics. It did not take long, however, for the medium to be used as an instrument for socialist propaganda (Scholz 2001).

Prior to 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was erected, illegal border traffic and the high number of spy organizations and smuggler rings operating from West Berlin



Fig. 1. *Frösi* (7/1955).

were major problems for the East German authorities (Scholz 2009, “Innerdeutsche Grenze”). The first East German adventure strip, published in *Frösi* in 1954, focused on these problems: *Auf den Spuren von Spitznase* [In the Footsteps of Tip Nose].<sup>3</sup> Three children, two boys and a girl, chase smugglers across the sea route through the Baltic Sea. The captain of the ship and the smugglers are arrested. This amusing story, with pictures and rhyming text under the panels, was not much of a “socialist comic,” but followed traditional German picture stories that one could still find in West Germany at that time. But this soon changed. In 1955, *Frösi* modified their main comic story *Mäxchen Pffiffig* [Max Smart] from a short gag strip to a longer semi-adventure strip. Still six panels, but now colored and with rhyming text under the panels, the story could extend over several months. The main hero, Mäxchen, created by Richard Hambach (Scholz 2004), is a member of the communist Young Scouts, recognizable by the blue necktie. In his first new adventure story, published over seven months, he and his friends find a briefcase that contains technical drawings of a bridge. The owner must be an agent, concludes Mäxchen, and he takes the briefcase by force, instigating a wild chase. In “Mäxchen Pffiffig’s Abenteuer: Der Mann mit der Aktentasche” [Mäxchen Pffiffig’s Adventures: The Man with the briefcase],<sup>4</sup> (Fig 1) Mäxchen helps the uniformed “Volkspolizei” (People’s Police), the national police of the GDR, arrest

the gang of saboteurs. The following year, Mäxchen Pfiffig's appearance changes dramatically. Mäxchen and his friends act now as black and white drawn figures before a photorealistic colored background. Each panel is combined with a longer narrative text. Mäxchen again hunts industrial spies in "Mäxchen, der Detektiv."<sup>5</sup> Mäxchen and his friends in the Association of Young radio hobbyists hear about a burglary in the nearby VEB factory [People-owned enterprise] "Glashütte." The research department of this socialist factory had developed a special method to produce flexible, unbreakable glass, and industrial espionage is suspected. When the alleged spy and his assistant have a meeting in the back room of a private tavern, the radio hobbyists, all boys, build a monitoring system to track the conversation. With this information, the "Volkspolizei" can catch the not-so-clever spies. Even if the spies' faces were marked by their criminal mentality, in this amusing story, they didn't make a dangerous impression.

Nearly all East German weeklies published comics in the 1950s. The weekly magazine of the GDR "Border police" published the adventure comic "Fritz', Fratz' und Lieschens' Abenteuer an der Grenze" [Fritz, Lieschen, and Fratz's Adventure at the Border] in a women's supplement.<sup>6</sup> As in most of the German picture stories before 1945, the comic had captions and word balloons. Fritz and Lieschen, perky members of the scout organization living near the border with West Germany, meet an unfamiliar man, and they are rightly suspicious of him: he is an illegal *Grenzgänger* [border crosser]. In cooperation with the East German border troops, they chase him down and the troopers arrest him. The caption offers a reassuring and simple conclusion: "Of course, all three were happy about it." And the young scouts, accompanied by their dog, were even rewarded for their help: "Fritz and Lieschen got beautiful books. But the dog got a big sausage".<sup>7</sup> These early East German comics were designed to be funny: the villains were stupid men, intellectually inferior to the children of both genders, and the children were always wearing their blue neckties to indicate their membership in the communist scouts. And the "Volkspolizei" kept everyone safe.

## East German Comics in the Shadow of the Berlin Wall

**A**fter the Berlin Wall was erected on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1961, East German comics developed from amusing funnies to serious and more realistic adventure strips. GDR-authorities officially referred to the Wall as the *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall* [Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart] to protect the socialist world against the evils of capitalist countries, NATO countries under the leadership of the United States, and West Germany, which was considered a fascist state. This worldview was perpetuated in propaganda campaigns until the fall of the Wall in 1989. Even comics were employed to convey these messages: young readers were educated to understand that all forms of spying, sabotage, and smuggling were only possible because of the open border. And therefore comic villains grew more realistic and the image of the enemy



Fig. 2. *Atze* (8/1961).

became increasingly threatening. Instead of smugglers, saboteurs, or “Grenzgänger,” the villains in the 1960s were spies, armed and ready to use violence. With this more serious change in tone, girls lost their part as comic heroines. From now on, comics set in a more realistic environment dominated, with stories mixing fact and fiction to articulate political messages.

Two weeks before the Wall was erected, *Atze* published an impressive spy story, this time with fewer panels but accompanied by lengthy captions: “Der Spion. Nach Protokollen unserer Sicherheitsorgane” [The Spy. According to Protocols from our Secret Police].<sup>8</sup> The comic’s heroes were young male scouts who became suspicious of a photographer, whom they reported to the police. The “sinister looking” man was arrested and during the interrogation, he admitted that he was spying for the British secret service. In his apartment, the police found capsules with films on which plants, bridges, and stations were documented. And the spy had a Telefunken radio,

a brand “Made in Western Germany.” The spy could be arrested thanks to the politically vigilant scouts and the good work of the GDR’s “state security” (stasi). The Berlin Wall, then, was justified as a measure to keep out “spies, diversionists, terrorists and smugglers,” even before it was constructed (Fig. 2).

In January 1963, the Congress of the East German communist party passed a resolution addressing the “extensive and comprehensive development of socialism,” which had consequences for all youth publications as well. The magazine *Atze* underwent a transformation under the ambitious new editor Wolfgang Altenburger, appointed responsible editor in 1963 (Scholz 2010, “Wolfgang Altenburger”). Altenburger joined the publisher Junge Welt in 1956 as a trained Scout leader while he was also studying at Leipzig University. Simultaneously he developed diverse comics projects and wrote most of the comics in *Atze* and the weeklies. Later he summarised his experiences in a Masters thesis (Altenburger). According to Altenburger, socialist comics should convey “pictorially concrete” social developments and their causes, and encourage reflections on them; they should speak to children and awaken their sense of solidarity, justice, partisanship, optimism, respect for work and the worker. Children should be offered “real heroes and role models” whose experiences “do not unfold for the sake of adventure but have specific, real causes.” For Altenburger, socialist realism was the best method for representing important and uplifting messages. He interwove the tradition of German picture sheets (Bilderbogen) with the tenets of socialist realism, producing comics rendered in a realistic style. He was also inspired by and borrowed from the example of Chinese picture stories. Their most remarkable stylistic feature was the equal roles attributed to text and image, which supposedly strengthened their political impact. Altenburger’s main aim was to use the “single image,” with no interaction between words and images. He wanted to break away from “the ancient form of the picture-to-picture story” and attain “a new form” ideally including “both symbolic, abstracted illustrations accentuating the climaxes of the fables as well as an exciting, detailed series of single images.” In this manner, he sought to disassociate comics from light entertainment. As a consequence, his new political-historical comics were always excessively pedantic (Altenburger; Scholz 2010, “Wolfgang Altenburger”).

Altenburger implemented his ideas in the magazine *Atze*. In January 1967, the magazine changed dramatically, covering now sixteen instead of twelve pages, of which eight were in color. Every number included at least one “political-historical picture story” of six (later eight) pages, written mostly by Altenburger himself. Originally aimed at readers from ages nine to thirteen, the magazine sought to educate children about historical facts and processes. The political-historical story was often followed by a page of factual information, “*Atze* informs.” In fact, these stories were more conditioning their readers than informing them, especially in the case of spy stories.

In 1969, a story about industrial espionage appeared, focusing on arson and human trafficking in Berlin around the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 1961, the day the Berlin Wall was erected:

“Alarm um Mitternacht” [Alarm at midnight].<sup>9</sup> “West German imperialists and their agent organizations,” represented as older balding white men with glasses, threatened the GDR and the “peaceful construction” of socialism by luring thousands of East German professionals, engineers, and physicians to the West. Through promises and threats, these professionals, whose training was paid for with the money of the working people of the GDR, were enticed to betray their “homeland.”

The story aptly reflects the increased Cold War tensions following the division of Germany and Berlin. In 1945, the victorious powers divided the city into four sectors, analogous to the occupation zones into which Germany was divided. The sectors of the three Western Allies formed West Berlin, while the Soviet sector formed East Berlin. West Berlin was now surrounded by East German territory, and East Berlin was proclaimed capital of the GDR, a move that was not recognised by western powers. Until August 1961 citizens in Berlin could move freely in both parts of the city. Even though emigration was not legal, many East Germans were escaping to West Berlin due political pressure or for economic reasons, since the economic situation in West Berlin was much better than in the Eastern part of the city. One reason was the burden of war reparations the GDR owed to the Soviet Union after World War II, combined with the massive destruction of industry and lack of assistance, while the Marshall Plan benefitted the people in the West, especially in West Berlin, as a front-line city. At the same time, Berlin was rightly considered the capital of spies worldwide (Murphy, Kondrashev, Bailey).

The *Atze* comic from 1969 did not include a narrative account; instead individual events were spotlighted and commented in extensive captions. One storyline focused on an engineer, Müller, a young man with a nice wife, who received a tempting offer and stole secret documents, but the vigilance of his colleagues resulted in his arrest at the border. In another storyline, the West German General Speidel<sup>10</sup> prepared the troops of the Bundeswehr to invade the GDR after West Berlin-agents instigated riots on behalf of the Bonn government. But the night before 13<sup>th</sup> August, the *Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse* [Combat Groups of the Working Class] were alerted to secure the border to West Berlin. “Everyone is happy that the agents, smugglers and traitors were stopped,” the *Atze* story concludes. And in the regular commentary section, “Atze notes,” the reader was provided with more details, a mixture of facts and fiction. According to *Atze*, about eighty-two spy organizations based in West Berlin sought to undermine the GDR. More specifically, their goal was to provoke unrest that would give the “lurking Bundeswehr” an excuse to invade. As the editorial staff darkly concluded, “That would have meant war, but this danger was thwarted on August 13, 1961.”

Several comics about the Berlin Wall followed, always representing the alleged subversive activities of West German intelligence agencies acting together with West German media, represented as elderly white men, often with fedora hats and sunglasses. This was the case in the *Atze* story, “Alarm in der Brunnenstrasse” [Alarm in Brunnen Street],<sup>11</sup> which begins:

August 1961. West German imperialists and their henchmen think the time has come to eliminate our socialist achievements. For years they have prepared the day X by plundering and sabotage. Now they want to recapture our state-owned enterprises and the land of the cooperative farmers. RIAS<sup>12</sup>, Springer<sup>13</sup> and the television media are agitating against our party and state leadership to create unrest.

To put an end to these subversive activities, the solution was the “Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart”—the intended message about the purpose of the Wall for East German children.

Political comics in *Atze* could also tell emotional stories more suited to influencing kind-hearted children. A good example is a story published in March 1974 about the friendship between children living near the intra-German border and the border troops: “Hektors’ neue Freunde” [Hektor’s New Friends].<sup>14</sup> The Border Troops were originally part of the National People’s Army (NVA), but they were separated from the NVA at the turn of the year 1973/74, which may have been the reason for publishing this story at that time. The introduction tells the reader that the tale was influenced by true events: an incident on the border not far from a Mecklenburg village the year before. In the story, the Border Troopers and the scouts stand together against extremely dangerous and brutal “border violators,” armed and equipped with radios and foreign currency. One of them, disguised as a railwayman, shoots and injures the border guard’s dog. The dog was so badly injured that it could no longer perform border service. In the end, the dog receives a new home with the scouts. The intended message for young readers was clear: border violators were not refugees, but criminals and spies. Even if they were disguised as good people, they were dangerous; they would even kill your pet and deserved no mercy. In another moralizing *Atze* story from 1985, Americans are depicted as immoral and susceptible to greed. “Following the protocols of the GDR security services,” organized criminal groups blackmailed an American soldier in West Berlin. The American and his friends were represented gambling, smoking, and consuming alcohol. The soldier became involved in trafficking in 1974 because of his gambling debts, but the vigilant East German border control stopped him.<sup>15</sup>

### **CIA: The Main Enemy?**

**A**lthough the West German intelligence service was frequently depicted as the enemy of the GDR, the real enemy of world peace from *Atze*’s point of view was the United States and its civilian foreign intelligence service, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This was not new. In the first years of the Cold War, anti-American propaganda in cartoons and posters were present on large scale even in East Germany. Wilhelm Pieck, the first president of the GDR, called for these anti-American messages months before the

GDR was founded. On a Party Conference in East Berlin in January 1949, he declared, that it was in the “national interest” to drive “US imperialism,” which had been “unmasked” in the Soviet Zone as the “legacy of Hitler fascism,” out of Europe (Vorsteher 2).

In 1975, the anti-American campaign had a revival when a German translation of a Soviet book about the American intelligence community, particularly the CIA, was published in East Germany. In the introduction, Professor W. A. Tumanow, (who, in 1990s, would become one of the fathers of the new Russian constitution), described the



Fig. 3. *Atze* (1/1977).



American intelligence community as a very dangerous enemy, an uncontrollable power “that posed a great danger to both the democratic traditions of the American people themselves and to the democratic, progressive movements in many areas of the world” (*Geheimnisse* 10). After this point, many *Atze* comics accused the CIA of subversive activities against independence movements all over the world.

In July of the same year, *Atze* published *Auf den Strassen von Lissabon* [On the Streets of Lisbon],<sup>16</sup> about Portugal and the so-called Carnation Revolution, initially a military coup in Lisbon which overthrew the former authoritarian regime and paved the way for democratic reforms. In the comic, left-wing activists began returning from exile, and new political parties arose. Meanwhile, in the Sheraton Hotel in Lisbon, representatives from the CIA and other NATO-intelligence organisations, along with people from “big business,” are discussing countermeasures to stop these movements, as they did in Chile some year before. The image of the CIA deputy is of a “Schreibtischtäter,” a kind of mastermind who is deeply conservative, bourgeois, and dangerous. In the story, however, the CIA initiative failed; nevertheless the new revolutionary forces had to remain vigilant, as the *Atze* story concluded.

The story is not far from real events in Portugal at the time. At the beginning of the coup, President Ford was informed that US interests were not in danger, and that the coup could even “provide some near-term benefits for the United States” (Kissinger). But the power struggle that followed “between Communist and moderate forces” concerned American intelligence; especially when they understood that Moscow had “placed itself more fully and openly on the side of the Portuguese Communists and Armed Forces Movement” (*National Intelligence Bulletin*). The *Washington Post* suspected that the USA and other NATO-allies were involved in the Lisbon revolution, and reported that in April, that when the movement was moving to the left, a deputy director of the CIA was sent to Lisbon (Acoca). Thus, the situation in Portugal was not quite under control when the *Atze* story was published in the summer of 1975.



Fig.4. *Atze* (3/1989).

In another story, “Operation Calanda schlägt fehl” [Operation Calanda Fails],<sup>17</sup> we meet CIA field agents in Cuba. This comic, drawn by artist Horst Klöpfel, has the style and appearance of a Western comic. Klöpfel used his long experience in advertising and rarely drew freehand; instead, he worked with photo templates, and used the desired format with appropriate technology. With this method, he became the best realistic draftsman among the GDR-comic artists. In his work for *Atze*, he adopted the style of Western comics, characterized by an interesting picture composition and the use of speech balloons.

The story takes place in 1969, but is obviously inspired by The Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba undertaken by a CIA-sponsored paramilitary group in 1961. The CIA agent is a civilian, immediately recognizable with stereotypical dark sunglasses and cowboy hat. But the operation falters because the rural population supports Fidel Castro. In the story a young Cuban boy sets a trap in the jungle for the invaders; some are eaten by crocodiles, others nearly burnt to death by the peasants and the Castro militia. This story is one of the most violent examples of East German comics. When the invaders torture a Cuban peasant to death, one scene is so violent, that the image was discreetly covered by a speech-balloon. Finally, the CIA had to concede defeat. The message is clear: because the Cuban nation supported Fidel Castro, the counterrevolution could be foiled (Fig. 3).

A similar story of CIA failure, this time about Nicaragua and the Sandinista National Liberation Front, appeared in *Atze* in March, 1989: “Hasenfuss am Fallschirm” [Rabbit’s Foot on Parachute]<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 4). The art is by Günther Hain, one of the most conservative East German comic artists, presenting the typical Altenburger comic style, with a more traditional panel composition and omitting speech balloons. The CIA-backed contras supply aircraft, but the Sandinistas shoot down their DC-3, and the pilot, Hasenfuss (Rabbit’s Foot), is arrested and put on trial. When he confesses that he had supplied gangs in Vietnam and Laos for the CIA, he is sentenced to twenty years in prison. The loss of the aircraft precedes an image of the CIA officer, represented by a plump and angry general with glasses that hide his eyes. Two years later, as a peaceful gesture by Nicaragua’s National party, Hasenfuss is released from prison. But the contras had not given up.

## Chekists Intervene

One expects that the CIA in the *Atze* stories would be the enemy, but what about the KGB? Was the image of the Soviet intelligence more favorable? East German comics do not directly depict the KGB, only the Cheka—the first Soviet state security organization—and the legendary chief of the Soviet secret police, Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, in “Tscheikisten greifen ein” [Chekists Intervene].<sup>19</sup> The hero of the story is the young worker, Pawel Rybakow, who wants to help neglected children and joins

the Cheka. In Moscow, Dzerzhinsky himself briefs him on his new responsibilities. The *Atze* story cites Dzerzhinsky's infamous maxim—a Chekist “has to have a cold head, a hot heart, and clean hands.”<sup>20</sup> This slogan was often used in Soviet propaganda to romanticize the image of the Chekists, and, by extension, the image of the KGB.

In the story Pawel promises to do everything possible to stop the counter-revolutionaries. When he arrives at his destination, Petrovsk, he is helped by the regional Cheka. According to them, the trail of the counter-revolutionaries leads to the circus “Karandash” [Pencil]. Pawel goes there undercover and secretly listens to a fierce conversation that exposes the clown as the main enemy. To get him, the Chekists attend the circus performance, where they hear the “clown's dirty jokes about Lenin and the achievements of the revolution.” They arrest the clown, who later in the interrogation tearfully confesses and then betrays his companions. “This corruptible clown will receive his just punishment,” concludes Pawel, and plans to get rid of all counter-revolutionaries in Petrovsk. After fighting with cunning, Pawel and his comrades succeed and arrest the whole gang. The young East German reader is supposed to conclude that the Cheka, the predecessor of the KGB, were fighting “bandits” and was a friend to all children.

Published in January, 1978, this *Atze* story stands out for including the image of a corruptible “clown making dirty jokes about the achievements of the revolution.” In the same year, the novel *Der Gaukler* [The Clown] by Harry Thürk was published, and soon became a bestseller in East Germany. Given that the novel deals with the CIA promoting a Soviet dissident as a Nobel laureate, it is easy to decode that the antagonist is Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This is a key novel about Solzhenitsyn and dissidents in the Soviet Union; thus it was no coincidence that the *Atze* story was in the same spirit.

## The Image of the Stasi

Finally, we turn to a specific example of the work of the East German Ministry for State Security, commonly known as the Stasi, published in *Atze* in 1974: “Eine abgeschlossene Akte” [A Closed File].<sup>21</sup> The story begins with a documentary-style introduction from a report by ADN, the East German state news agency, on the sentencing of a West German citizen for four years in prison for “subversive” trafficking:

May 1974. For months criminal gangs and traffickers, with support of the West German authorities, have been fighting dirty against the GDR. They constantly violate the agreements concluded between the two German states in order to enrich themselves and to harm the GDR.

In 1972, West and East Germany had recognized each other as sovereign states by signing the *Grundlagenvertrag* [Basic Treaty]. Additionally, the Transit Treaty

of May 26<sup>th</sup> 1972 arranged access to and from West Berlin from West Germany. In this time of détente, human trafficking again became a growing problem for the East German regime. As the GDR increasingly lost its educated workforce, it was the responsibility of state security to deal with *Republikflucht* [desertion from the republic]. Those who assisted escape were viewed as criminal-trafficker gangs. The *Atze* story is about the Stasi smashing a trafficking organization called “Mickat,” after its leader. This Mickat was a former criminal smuggler, but he now had a new job smuggling specialists, physicians, and scientists from the GDR to the West. This was more lucrative than smuggling currency, as he had done previously. An unpleasant man with dark glasses, Mickat persuades former GDR citizens to blackmail their educated relatives and former colleagues in order to entice them to the West. The smuggler takes advantage of the transit route, a result of agreements between the two German states, and receives the backing of “the American intelligence service.” This form of escape is dangerous, particularly hiding in a car to pass unseen through the border. When the family of a physician understood the risks and hesitates, Mickat forces them; even in the GDR, Mickat was armed. But there was “help.” An undercover agent of the GDR-security services had already infiltrated the Mickat gang. At the Stasi headquarters, the comrades, a socialist collective of strong and healthy-looking men, plan the necessary countermeasures. With their well-positioned agent and their network in the GDR, the Mickat gang is stopped for good. This propaganda comic is clear: trafficking organizations are led by criminals, their motive is not humanitarian but quite the opposite, the main forces behind these organizations are Western intelligence services, and escape is extremely dangerous. And as a final warning, the comic suggests that the omniscient Stasi have already infiltrated these gangs.

This story is also based on real situations; for the Stasi, those in the medical profession in particular were suspected of wanting to leave the GDR and were under surveillance. Nevertheless, many succeeded with the help of “escape aid organizations,” in Stasi jargon called “traffickers,” which the Stasi deliberately infiltrated when possible. In the early years after 1961 these groups were still ideologically marked. Later these organizations became more professional and commercialized, but due their loss of prestige, they often operated in criminal milieus. After 1972, they demanded more money from the escapees, and prices rose from 3,000 DM per refugee to 15,000 by the mid-seventies. Doctors and others in the medical profession in particular developed into one of the main sources of customers for these “escape aid organizations” at the time of the *Atze* story (Wahl).

### **The Fate of *Atze* Comics**

**I**n the 1950s, GDR comics were still very similar to German pre-war comics. Even East German comics about spies, saboteurs, and smugglers were amusing. But this

changed in the 1960s to more realistic stories with increased violence and dangerous enemies. Humor no longer had any place in these political “picture stories.” Enemy spies were portrayed as villains and their goals were illegitimate; they dealt in sabotage, industrial espionage, smuggling, and human trafficking. And they did not hesitate to use guns as lethal weapons. They could be politicians and masterminds or criminals working for money, but they always acted immorally. Nonetheless, in *Atze* comics, they were always portrayed as human: there is nothing animalistic or demonic in their appearance.

By contrast, the East German security forces, Volkspolizei, NVA, and Stasi (and even the Cheka) were portrayed as strong, brave, helpful, and noble saviours. *Atze* stories portrayed socialist Stasi collectives and brave field agents (“Kundschafter”) in action, and thus played an important role in the regime’s struggle for hearts and minds. They enjoyed a certain resonance with their readers, especially with the younger male generation. Even the draftees—military service (18 months) was mandatory for all male citizens in the GDR—were reading these comics, at the very least due to a lack of alternatives. In the case of comics, there were only two magazines—*Atze* and *Mosaik*—and some comic pages in *Frösi* and in several weeklies, but there were hardly any samizdat comics (Handloik). The effectiveness and success of “socialist education” through comics can be deduced when one assumes that most readers would read only a selection of the material. In considering the reception of these comics, one must bear in mind that the relevance of the GDR’s propaganda goals was usually fabricated discursively and that other print media, the stage, radio and television, reinforced the ideological messages contained in comics (Lost).

The examples discussed in this chapter demonstrate how *Atze* stories closely followed ideological outlines prescribed by the communist party as well as the concept of the socialist picture story developed by Wolfgang Altenburger, editor of the comic magazines and author of most of the political-history comics. According to Altenburger, comics were dominated by individual images, accompanied by detailed text: word balloons and sound effects were mostly avoided. Using a realistic style, the authors of these comics tried to convey a strong sense of authenticity, but mostly they remained unable to develop complex characters or stories. This probably accounts for why they did not grow in popularity in their time. Today, in contrast to the still popular *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen* (and a handful of funny stories from other comic publications), the political-historical *Atze* stories are rightfully forgotten.

## Notes

- 1 “Junge Pioniere” was the East German youth organisation of schoolchildren aged 6 to 14.

- 2 For more historical background see Scholz, *Die DDR*, 2009. For the history of comics in the GDR see Lettkemann and Scholz 1994 and the website <http://www.ddr-comics.de/>. (2018-04-11). For information on the history of GDR-comics in English see Eedy 2014; Eedy 2018; Gersdorf 1996; Piesche 2002; Scholz 2015. East German cultural scientist Paul Thiel first brought GDR comics to light in the English-speaking world (Thiel 1979). As a museum educator at the GDR State Museums in East Berlin, he did what he could to rehabilitate comics in the GDR through lectures, articles, and exhibitions: he even founded a comic society in East Berlin in the late 1970s (Weissahn).
- 3 Art: Lothar Paul and Bernard Teschler. *Frösi* (4-7/1954).
- 4 Art: Richard Hambach. *Frösi* (1-7/1955).
- 5 Art: Richard Hambach. *Frösi* (2-5/1956).
- 6 Art: Heinz Rammelt. *Unsere Kameradin. Frauenbeilage des "Grenzpolizisten"* (1957/58).
- 7 *Unsere Kameradin* (11/1958).
- 8 Art: Hans Betcke, text: Eckard Rösler. *Atze* (8/1961, 2-3).
- 9 Art: Karl Fischer. *Atze* (8/1969, 2-7).
- 10 Hans Speidel, Supreme Commander of the NATO ground forces in Central Europe from 1957 to 1963.
- 11 Art: Günter Hain. *Atze* (8/1971, 2-7).
- 12 RIAS (German: Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor; English: Broadcasting Service in the American Sector) was a radio and television station in the American Sector of Berlin during the Cold War. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rundfunk\\_im\\_amerikanischen\\_Sektor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rundfunk_im_amerikanischen_Sektor) (2018-04-14).
- 12 Axel Springer SE, a West German prominent publishing house with headquarters in West Berlin, was publishing many popular dailies around 1960: *BILD*; *DIE WELT*, *WELT am SONNTAG*, *BERLINER MORGENPOST* and *B.Z.*
- 14 Text: Major K. Peters, art: G. Hain. *Atze* (3/1974, 2-7, 10-11).
- 15 "Major Meißner erinnert sich" [Major Meissner Remembers]. Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (6/1985, 10-11).
- 16 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (7/1975, 2-7,10-11).
- 17 Art: H. Klöpfel. *Atze* (1/1977, 2-7,10-11).
- 18 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (3/1989, 2-7).
- 19 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (1/1978, 2-7, 10-11).
- 20 "Prominent Russians: Felix Dzerzhinsky." <https://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/felix-dzerzhinsky/> (2018-04-16).
- 21 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (10/1974, 2-7, 10-11).

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Part three: Germany

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Elizabeth “Biz” Nijdam

## Towards a Graphic Historicity: Authenticity and Photography in the German Graphic Novel

Within the emergent genre of autobiographical, fictional, and non-fictional graphic narratives on East German history, there is a subgroup that I have termed graphic historiography.<sup>1</sup> Decidedly a niche phenomenon, this category consists of some half-dozen comics works that bear striking similarities. Furthermore, this body of graphic literature comments on the very process of historical writing, hence its categorization as historiography, which is both the study of historical writing as well as the processes of it. Typically not produced *by* East Germans but *about* East Germans, these texts differ in tone, goals and strategies from the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical graphic novels by the third generation of East Germans who authored *Drüben!, Das Land das es nicht gibt* [The Country that Doesn't Exist] (Peter Auge Lorenz, 2013), *Kinderland* [Children's Land] (Mawil, 2014), *Die sechs Schüsse von Philadelphia* [The Six Shots from Philadelphia] (Ulrich Scheel, 2008), and *DDR Land* [GDR Land] (Till Lenecke, 2013).<sup>2</sup> They feature graphic narratives that describe important events in East German history, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the People's Uprising of 1953, in addition to well-documented aspects of living in the GDR, such as the strict censorship, political oppression, and attempts to flee. Moreover, these graphic novels are heavily researched, with traces of that process clearly signaled within the texts themselves. They were all in fact produced in collaboration with experts in East German history and with the support of German pedagogical, political, and historical foundations.<sup>3</sup> Graphic historiography thereby emerges not just as artistic creations by individuals or groups of individuals, but also as part of various institutionalized projects that seek to commemorate and communicate the history of East Germany to the wider public. In turn, the programmatic nature of these endeavors incorporates the graphic novels themselves into the archives from which they emerge as part of the institutions' collections.<sup>4</sup>

In 2011, Susanne Buddenberg, Thomas Henseler, and Johann Ulrich, with support from the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur [Foundation

for the Study of Communist Dictatorship in East Germany (GDR)], published *Grenzfall* [Borderline Case] about an East Berlin high school student Peter Grimm, who rebels against the dictatorship and connects with an oppositional group of like-minded individuals. Prevented from taking his *Abitur* (a set of exams in the final year of secondary school), Peter is expelled from school and begins publishing an underground newspaper, *Grenzfall*. He discovers later that someone in his circle of confidants is a Stasi informant, jeopardizing the newspaper as well as his freedom. In 2012, with support from the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Buddenberg and Henseler published *Berlin–Geteilte Stadt* [*Berlin–A City Divided*, 2012] [Federal Agency for Civic Education], which narrates the history of divided Germany from the East German perspective through five short non-fiction stories. Buddenberg and Henseler continued collaborating, putting together an exhibition of a famous East German escape through an underground tunnel. In May 2013 they published the exhibition in the form a non-fiction comic based on these historical events, *Tunnel 57: Eine Fluchtgeschichte als Comic* [Tunnel 57: An Escape Story as Comic], in collaboration with the Berlin Wall Foundation and Maria Nooke, René Mounajed, and Stefan Semel. That same month, Alexander Lahl, Tim Köhler, Max Mönch, and artist Kitty Kahane published *17. Juni: Die Geschichte von Armin und Eva* [June 17: The Story of Armin and Eva], a project for the Instituts für angewandte Geschichte [Insitute for Applied History], supported by the Brandenburgischen Landeszentrale für politische Bildung [Brandenburg Center for Political Education]. This graphic novel retells the events surrounding the East German People’s Uprising in 1953 through the fictional story of the protagonist Eva’s missing lover, Armin. In 2014, Lahl, Mönch and Kahane published a second graphic novel on East German history, *Treibsand* [Quicksand], which was supported by the Bundesstriftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur. *Treibsand* takes place in the summer of 1989 and focuses on Tom Sandman, a journalist sent to Berlin to report on the unrest in the GDR. Lastly, in 2015, U. Loge published *Da wird sich nie was ändern!* [Nothing Will Ever Change!] with Jaja Verlag, which follows the lives of several individuals through the final months of the GDR. While Loge’s graphic novel has no formal affiliation, she thanks the Archiv der DDR Opposition for their assistance with her research in the section following an appendix that lists the quotes she integrated into her text.

Of the examples of graphic historiography listed, *Berlin–Geteilte Stadt* makes the most concerted effort to mobilize the archive. In addition to heavily-researched contextual information at the end of each chapter that articulates the historical and political situation in which the biographical episode takes place, Buddenberg and Henseler reproduce archival documents within the comics’ individual chapters and detailed renderings of archival artifacts in the introduction to each chapter. They also engage photography for plot points and as reference material. Using *Berlin–Geteilte Stadt* as a case study, this chapter assesses the role of the archive in aesthetic

and narrative strategies in representing East German history, demonstrating how its deployment gestures towards the veracity of the comics' historical presentation while undermining the idea of authentic representations of history altogether. I thereby argue that subjective interpretations of historical events in the comics form—even when fictionalized—are an important avenue for imparting historical experience. With particular interest in the graphic narrative's use of archival photographs, which emerge at the discursive intersection of comics scholarship on authenticity and photography, I posit that the hand-rendering of archival documents simultaneously draws attention to the constructed nature of comics and the obscuring quality of photographic mediation to highlight the artifice of historical writing, demonstrating that history itself is also a construction which relies heavily on narrative structures and temporal signifiers legible to contemporary readers, mediation, and memory.

*Berlin-Geteilte Stadt* features five graphic biographies that focus on how one individual or family navigated the political oppression, divided city, and strict censorship laws of the GDR. With the exception of "Familie Holzapfel" [Holzapfel Family], Buddenberg und Henseler relate each chapter in the first person, simulating the aesthetic of graphic autobiography. This technique also recalls the transcription of oral histories, a methodology that played a role in the artists' interviews with the protagonists (90 percent of these interviews the artists carried out themselves) (Buddenberg and Henseler, Personal Interview). In "Regina Zywiets: Wie der Mauerbau fast mein Abitur verhindert hätte" [Regina Zywiets: How the Fall of the Wall Almost Prevented my Graduation], a young woman must choose between her education and the country in which she grew up after the Berlin Wall is built in 1961. In "Ursula Malchow: Das Krankenhaus an der Mauer" [Ursula Malchow: The Hospital at the Wall], the protagonist recounts her experience working at Lazarus Hospital on the western side of the Wall, where she witnesses numerous attempts to flee the GDR, one even fatal. "Familie Holzapfel: Mit der Seibahn über die Mauer" [Holzapfel Family: With a Zipline Over the Wall] follows a family that escapes the GDR via a homemade zipline,<sup>5</sup> narrowly missing detection by an East German border guard. "Detlef Matthes: Die andere Seite" [Detlef Matthes: The Other Side] tells the story of an amateur photographer who gets caught taking pictures of restricted areas and is subsequently imprisoned for six weeks. Lastly, "Jan Hildebrandt: Mein 18. Geburtstag" [Jan Hildebrandt: My 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday] takes place on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989, recounting the protagonist's birthday celebration that ends with the opening of the Berlin Wall.

Readers of *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt* are immediately struck by the dedicated research, pedagogical nature, and high-quality paper and printing of this 96-page book-bound graphic novel.<sup>6</sup> Also featuring information on public transportation to the important geographic sites of the graphic narratives and online links to

additional information, *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt* is an unusual example of a German comic book that appears directed at tourists and young learners, while also functioning as a historical guide through the city.

## The Mobilization of the Archive in Graphic Historiography

Unlike graphic autobiography, graphic historiography does not bear witness to the East German historical period;<sup>7</sup> instead it reconstructs and narrativizes the history of the GDR through intense research, a combination of biographical and fictional information, and archival documents such as photographs and official paperwork. Consequently, this body of work does not simply thematize history as a byproduct of its narrative, as graphic autobiography arguably does; rather, the making of history itself becomes the subject of these publications, ultimately highlighting its mediation through narrative interpretive structures and, as Hayden White would argue, its status as a genre of writing.<sup>8</sup> Through my analysis of photographic images as markers of authenticity in Buddenberg and Henseler's *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt*, this chapter demonstrates how graphic historiography reveals history's contradictions the moment documentary material is mobilized. By drawing attention to history's curation via the archival documents required to establish historical writing's sense of authenticity, graphic historiography demonstrates how history itself is also a construction.

While graphic historiography features fiction and non-fiction stories, both forms of historical narrative are presented as true. By incorporating official documents, photographs, newspaper clippings, and artifacts into the storylines, graphic historiography recreates an impression of the historical period through objects, establishing its historical accuracy—or historicity—through an engagement with the archive. Maps and blueprints of buildings propel the plot forward, while they also demonstrate that the artists present an accurate portrayal of the architectural space in which the events took place; passports and exit visas visually mark turning points in the narrative arc in addition to providing evidence of the artists' archival work; newspaper excerpts and documentary photographs offer clues to understand the historical period, while further confirming the extensive research that made the graphic novel possible and attesting to its credibility; and archival artifacts, such as bullets, tickets, and pieces of the Berlin Wall (which introduce the chapters of *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt*) act as metaphors and leitmotifs to inform the reader's understanding of the story and foreshadow events to come. These elements of graphic historiography contribute to the sense of historical "truthfulness" of the comic's imagined scenes through the objects that existed in those spaces.<sup>9</sup> Serving to signal the historical reliability of the graphic narrative, these archival artifacts function as markers of authenticity, establishing the graphic novel's claim to representing a

“real” or “authentic” experience of the historical period, even when the stories told are fictionalized. Together with footnotes, bibliographies, appendages, contextual information, and lists of citations, these objects and images gesture towards the comic’s historical accuracy and contribute to graphic historiography’s endeavor to substantiate, legitimize, and validate their stories.<sup>10</sup>

## **Authentic Inauthenticity in Graphic Narrative**

**H**owever, while these texts’ attempts to establish authenticity are clear, the very idea of authenticity itself is fraught. How can anything, in fact, be represented authentically? Representation in the first place implies mediation, which immediately distances that which is represented from the “real.” This tension between claims to authenticity, the inevitable gap between reality and representation, and the impossibility of authentic portrayal itself is at the foundation of this chapter’s theoretical understanding of historical representations.

Based on real life events—even when fictionalized—graphic historiography is situated on the fringes of life writing and consequently participates in some of the discourse surrounding graphic memoir.<sup>11</sup> This rings particularly true with regards to claims to authenticity, as trusting the author is crucial in graphic novels thematizing events of historical importance (Schmid 14). In this sense, graphic historiography’s markers of authenticity also function as evidence of truth-telling. However, with experience itself being subjective, the very foundation of this discourse is complicated, as noted in the introduction to this volume. The hybrid, visual-verbal nature of the medium “pose[s] an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of ‘nonfiction,’” and can therefore “hardly be said to be ‘true’ in any straightforward sense” (Hatfield 112). Many scholars therefore attribute comics’ claim to authenticity to have very little to do with its relationship with the “real” world; instead the strength of comics’ representation relates to the form’s capacity to communicate emotional truths through perspective, line, composition, and silence (Hatfield 113). Consequently, the comics medium’s ability to present and perform subjectivity has led some comics scholars to posit that the medium’s claim to authenticity lies in the very fact that it is incapable of being authentic in a conventional sense, arguing that authenticity itself is an impossibility.

According to Hatfield, it is this process of ironic authentication, “graphically assert[ing] truthfulness through the admission of artifice,” that makes so-called non-fiction comics so fascinating (Hatfield 131). It is these same tensions between fact and fiction, real and imagined, objective and subjective, collected and curated, and authenticity and the impossibility of authenticity that offers new avenues and presenting historical truths.

Photography, on the other hand, does the opposite; it all but masks its

transformation of reality, setting it fundamentally apart from drawing. The hyper-realist, photo-naturalistic quality of the medium has been particularly problematic in photojournalism, specifically in regard to war coverage. Johannes Schmid examines the phenomenon in detail in his text *Shooting Pictures, Drawing Blood* (2016), comparing it to comics journalism of similarly fraught spaces. Photography's assessment as a "window upon reality" has led it to become one of media's most compelling sources of information (Schmid 10). The written word's ability to communicate lived experience remains controversial, while photography has been readily adopted as a way to visually access historic and contemporary events directly (Schmid 22). What Roland Barthes identified as the photograph's ability to "conceal elusively" (200)—in other words, "the myth of photographic truth" (Sturken and Cartwright 17)—has resulted in the evaluation of the art form, argue Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, as "an unmediated copy of the real world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life" (17). Photography consequently functions as seemingly undeniable evidence of individuals, events, and phenomena, offering proof in instances of jurisdicative, medical, and scientific inquiry as well as in personal identification (Sturken and Cartwright 17, Rugg 2, Sontag 3). Susan Sontag criticizes the cultural status of the medium in *On Photography* (1980), in which she observes that a "photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened," commenting that even when a photo is distorted, there "is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (3).

Photography's claim to unmediated truth, however, has been unequivocally refuted, and critical theorists, most famously Sontag, have demonstrated that photography as a medium is in fact just as subjective as any other form of representation (Sontag 4 and Tagg 3). Indexicality—the degree to which visual likeness or "truthfulness" is demonstrated in photography—requires specific conventions to become legible. Furthermore, every stage of the photographic process necessitates choices to produce meaning (Schmid 24). Signification is therefore constructed outside of the photograph itself and situated in the relationship between the image and the set of culturally specific beliefs and assumptions it evokes: "The photograph is the site at which these 'invisible' beliefs are made manifest" (Brothers 23). Yet, no matter how one thinks about the medium of photography and its processes of meaning-making, the photograph in the popular imagination continues to possess the "aura of machine objectivity" that positions it as sufficient evidence of the "real" (Sturken and Cartwright 16).

### **Photographic Mediation in Graphic Narrative**

**T**he integration of photography into comics and graphic novels is not new. Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) is an important example: the artist incorporates real photos of his family members into the graphic novel that stand in

stark contrast to the anthropomorphized mice that represent the same characters in the story. Similarly, in *Fun Home* (2006), Alison Bechdel recreates family photographs by hand, integrating them into the plot to offer contrasting visual perspectives of individuals and events. Moreover, in terms of her production process, Bechdel uses Polaroid pictures and digital camera images to stage her scenes prior to drawing, rendering photography an essential element of her artistic process. Like Bechdel, Joe Sacco uses photography as both theme and reference material in his comic journalism, where his camera is an essential aspect of the stories he tells as well as the way he captures fleeting moments in warzones that he returns to later to translate into panel frames (Dong 50). Lastly, Emmanuel Guibert's *The Photographer: Into War-torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* (2009) emerges at the intersection of comics and photography as a quasi equal mix of Guibert's cartooning and Didier Lefèvre's photographic images (Pedri 2), which in turn function to foreground "the distinctive characteristics of each storytelling modes" (Pedri "When Photographs Aren't Quite Enough" n.p.).

In all four of the above examples, photography emerges in the texts as both theme and tool, functioning as important elements of the graphic narrative as well as reference material for drawing. These comics thereby lay claim to a specific type of authentic representation through the camera's lens. Bechdel's use of photographic and digital images to stage her panels, for example, asserts authenticity in her representation through the use of photography as an instrument of her drawing process. Similarly, Spiegelman's family photographs in *Maus* lend an air of truthfulness to the telling of his father's story, accompanying the narrative with "evidence" from his personal archive. Either painstakingly redrawn in a comparatively hyper-realistic mode of representation or printed as reproductions, the integration of photography undeniably seeks to mark the authenticity of the narrative it forms a part of.<sup>12</sup>

However, Bechdel and Spiegelman's use of family photography also draws out media-specific tensions; the relationship between what is presented and what is experienced undermines the authenticity that the photographs concurrently claim. As Michael Chaney argues in *Graphic Subjects* (2011), this renders Bechdel's autobiography an act of visual comparativism:

...by contrasting Bechdel's drawings of photographs (no actual photos are reproduced) as archival documents with the cartooned story of a remembered—and fantasized—past, we can observe how she reinterprets the authority that photos as "official histories" seem to hold, and opens them to subjective reinterpretation. (133)

*Fun Home*, Hillary Chute observes, thereby demonstrates its preoccupation with the act of remembering—and mediating—the past on a formal level by "embodying



through its word and image composition the fissures and contradictions that are the focus of its plotline” and seeking “not to preserve the past as it was, as its archival obsession might suggest, but rather to circulate ideas about the past with gaps fully intact” (180). Bechdel’s photo-naturalistic recreations of family photographs therefore suggest the accuracy of the memories she recounts, while simultaneously declaring them highly subjective (Chute 200).

Furthermore, Bechdel’s use of a camera to compose a given panel’s scene and Sacco’s use of photos in the creation of his comics journalism underscore the highly composed quality of comics representation, marking once again its distance from the “real.” So while the photographic elements of *Maus*, *Fun Home*, and Sacco’s work establish the credibility of the stories present, signaling these graphic novels’ relationship with the “real,” at the same time, they also work to undermine it. Regarding Sacco’s work, Dirk Vanderbeke argues that although comics journalism offers new possibilities for reportage, it is also a contradiction:

It makes subjective perspectives, fictionalization and artistic distortions of reality in its quest for an essential truth that cannot always be successfully transmitted by a neutral and seemingly detached form. In doing so, comics journalism questions the claim of authenticity and truthfulness of photographic representation and thus suggests a necessary reconceptualization that also plays a role in postmodern theory of representation. (80)

Even *The Photographer’s* heavy reliance on photographs, in which Guibert composes entire pages of photographic images or contact sheets, encourages the reader to consider the relationship between photography and cartooning (Perdi “When Photographs Aren’t Quite Enough” n.p.). Essentially, while the photographic method establishes the credibility of these works, it is simultaneously pushing back on these artists’ ability to signal authenticity at all by drawing into question the very possibility of authentic representation.

### **Archival Photography in *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt***

**T**urning to the *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt*, the tensions between reality and mediation thematized by the relationship between the photographic and the drawn image remain the same. Within the stories themselves, photographs are reproduced as elements of the plot that evoke the archive and reinforce the credibility of the stories represented. In “Familie Holzapfel: Mit der Seilbahn über die Mauer” [Holzapfel Family: With a Zipline Over the Wall], for example, the chapter concludes with an August 1965 excerpt from the *BILD* newspaper, which features the story of the Holzapfel family’s escape and includes photos of the individuals (55). Furthermore, in

“Detlef Matthes: Die andere Seite” [Detlef Matthes: The Other Side], photographs and photography are important aspects of the plot, which focuses on the censorship of the protagonist’s art and presents Matthes’ own collection of photos within the panels (63, 64, 67, and 68) (Buddenberg and Henseler, Personal Interview).

In addition to the photos within the stories themselves, one photograph is featured at the end of each chapter in a section titled “Vor Ort” [on location]. Presenting an iconic Berlin location essential to the story’s narrative, these images reinforce the non-fiction status of the graphic narratives and demonstrate how they are situated in real space and time: Regina Zywiets crosses the border daily at the Friedrichstraße train station through the Tränenpalast [Palace of Tears] to attend high school in West Berlin; Ursula Malchow treats patients at the Lazaraus Hospital (today near the site of the Berlin Wall Memorial), which received wounded individuals trying to cross from East to West Berlin; the Holzapfel family escapes the GDR via the rooftop of the former Haus der Ministerien [House of Ministries], now the Bundesministerium der Finanzen [Federal Ministry of Finance], which served the Council of Ministers of the GDR and other affiliated organizations; Detlef Matthes’s 179 photos of the Berlin Wall were confiscated, including the one he took of the Brandenburg Gate, which his family also visited when he was a child; lastly, Jan Hildebrandt crosses over to West Berlin, along with thousands of other East Germans, via the bridge on Bornholmer Straße, the Bösebrücke, which was the first border crossing to be opened on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989 (Harrison 187). Accompanied by public transportation information, a description of each site’s role in German history written by historians, and a list of the important neighboring buildings and monuments, these photographs evoke the archive through their status as visual documentation and through the research accompanying them (Buddenberg and Henseler, Personal Interview) (Fig. 1).

However, while the “on location” photographs immediately suggest temporality—as both moments in time and in the history of the monuments they present—these images are in fact very difficult to temporally situate. The photos themselves are relatively small and feature few individuals. Furthermore, temporal markers of fashion, architecture, and transportation are difficult to discern. Only through close examination does it become clear that most evidence contemporary to the German divide—the Berlin Wall, the *Todesstreifen*, the watchtowers, and the border crossing checkpoints—has vanished. Even while Buddenberg and Henseler chose to present stories that took place in sites that look the same today as they did before 1989 (in front of the Haus der Ministerien is an extended section of the Berlin Wall that remains as a memorial, for example), upon closer examination, it is clear that all of these photos postdate German unification.

In fact, they coincide with the date of the comic book’s initial release, 2012. Yet, the images themselves strive to complicate their production date, as the photographer, Anna Schmelz, specifically sought to construct an air of timelessness in their

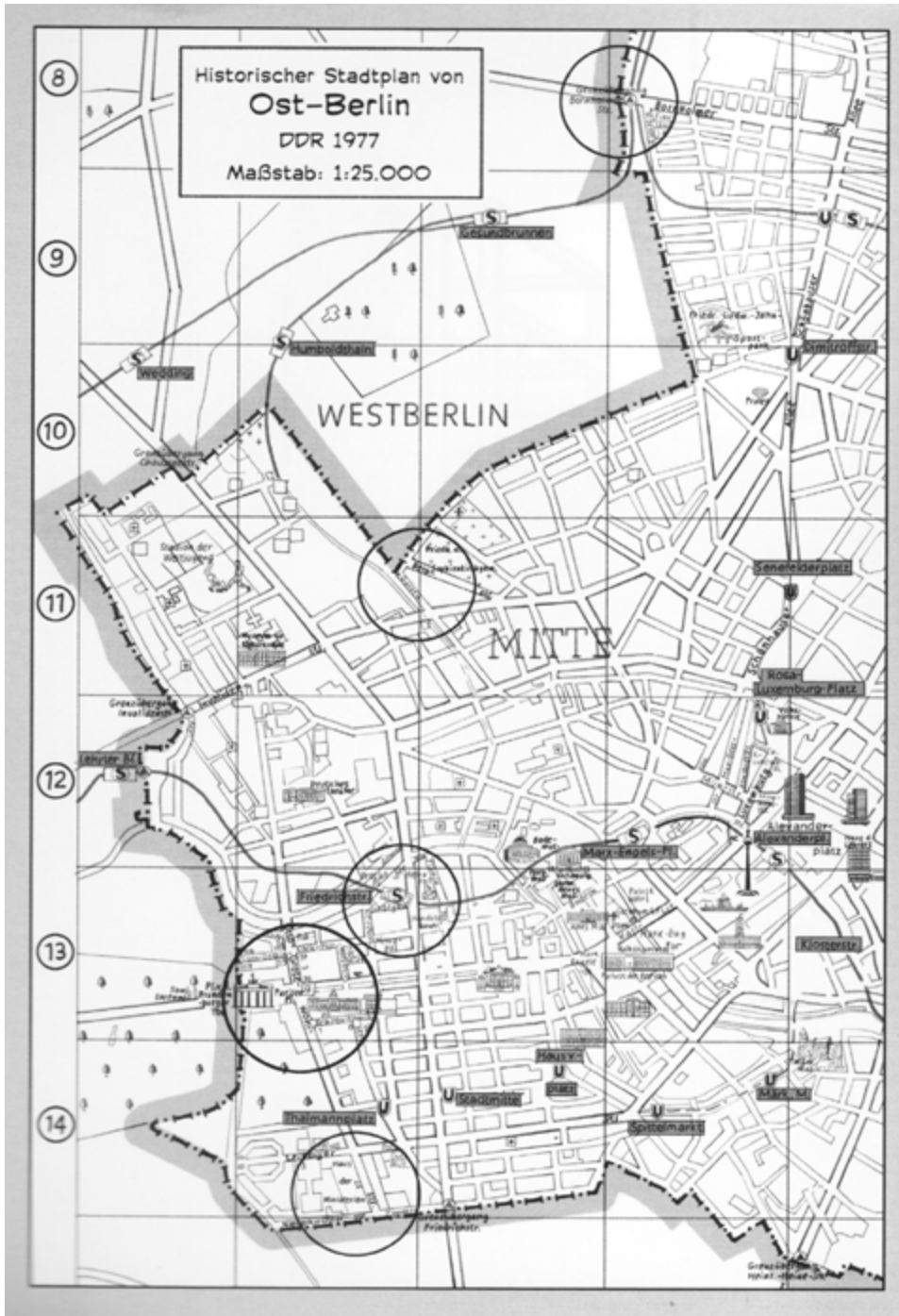


Fig. 1. Buddenberg and Henseler, photograph locations, "Historischer Stadtplan von Ost-Berlin" [Historical Map of East Berlin], *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt*, inside cover.

representation. While still presenting these spaces as we would encounter them today, she—in collaboration with Buddenberg and Henseler—composed these images in such a way as to draw direct parallels to their appearance before 1989. The photograph of the Lazarus hospital, for example, was taken during the winter so that large trees that now rise up in front of it would not obscure the view of the building—much as it would have looked in 1961, when Malchow’s story took place (Buddenberg and Henseler, Personal Interview). Moreover, with the graphic novel’s publication date continuing to recede into the past, these images remain static, representing a specific moment that began to distance itself from the present the instant the photograph was taken. Ultimately, even though the images are contemporary, without the ever-present evidence of construction characteristic of Berlin and other obvious markers of temporality, these photographs project an a-temporal image of the historic site that is located neither in the politics of the German divide nor in the reader’s lived experiences of these sites today.

Further complicating this complex network of temporalities is *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt’s* engagement with the same photographs as reference material, and particularly, the way the documentary photos at the end of each chapter relate to the imagery throughout the chapters themselves. Here, these photographs again function as markers of authenticity, but this time they do so by demonstrating the accuracy of graphic narrative’s representation of the buildings they capture. By encouraging the reader to flip through the previous pages to seek out the same site within the chapter’s panels, the images in the “on location” section make statements about memory and meaning-making in the process of writing history.

The multimodal quality of the comics medium, as Scott McCloud and others have argued, already invites the reader’s eye to move back and forth between panels, constructing narratives through the reader’s movement between images and text, panels and pages (See McCloud 63, Jacobs 5, and Hatfield 44). However, this final invitation to review the pages of the graphic narrative through the new historically—and contemporarily—situated lens of the photograph and its accompanying information recasts the graphic narrative’s relevance in time and space, while also complicating it. Like the drawing of photographs in general, the reader’s movement between photographic image and hand-drawn rendering of the same historic site draws out the tension between modes of representation, underscoring both the compositional quality of photographic mediation and the constructed nature of history itself through the comparative act.

Such a theoretical understanding of photography’s function manifests when looking at the photograph which closes *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt’s* final chapter, “Jan Hildebrandt: Mein 18. Geburtstag” (Fig. 2). Without reading the contextual information, the bridge on Bornholmer Straße is presented in black and white as an empty site of nondescript cultural and historical importance. The change

## VOR ORT

Der ehemalige Grenzübergang **BORNHOLMER STRASSE** ist heute eine ganz normale Brücke zwischen den Berliner Stadtteilen Prenzlauer Berg und Wedding. Der S-Bahnhof unter der Brücke lag früher mitten im Grenzgebiet und wurde von S-Bahnen, die den Norden mit dem Süden West-Berlins verbanden, ohne Halt durchfahren. Auf den beiden östlichen Gleisen der heutigen Fernbahn fuhr die Ost-Berliner S-Bahn durch den mit Mauern, Stacheldraht und Hundelaufanlagen gesicherten Todesstreifen. Eine Verbindung auf den S-Bahn-Ring gab es zu dieser Zeit nicht.

An der nördlichen Straßenseite sind noch Reste der sogenannten Hinterlandmauer zu finden. Gedenk- und Informationstafeln erinnern an die Geschichte des Ortes.

Der **BERLINER MAUERWEG** führt direkt am ehemaligen Grenzübergang vorbei. Er folgt mit 160 km Länge als Rad- und Wanderweg dem gesamten ehemaligen Mauerverlauf rund um die ehemalige Halbstadt West-Berlin herum. Folgt man dem ausgeschilderten Mauerweg hier über die Norweger Straße durch das Nordische Viertel, gelangt man zum **MAUERPARK**.

► S-Bahnhof Bornholmer Straße

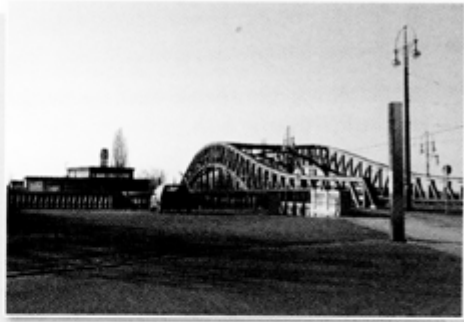


Fig. 2. Buddenberg and Henseler, “On Location,” “Jan Hildebrandt: My 18th Birthday,” *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt*, 93.

in representational mode inhibits its immediate identification with the same bridge represented in Hildebrandt’s story. Furthermore, the context has changed dramatically. In contrast to the graphic narrative’s rendering, the street leading onto the bridge is deserted, and only a single car is discernible, parked next to its entrance. Moreover, without any traces of the tram tracks or streetcars that have been crossing the bridge for decades, or the Berlin Wall memorial located adjacent to the bridge, the temporality of the image remains elusive. Lastly, whether we are viewing the bridge from the eastern or the western perspective is unclear, with the only geographic marker, other than the street, darkly shaded and illegible. Only upon closer inspection—and importantly, comparison with a panel that has perhaps used this photo as reference material—does the geographic position of the bridge emerge.

In the preceding chapter, the bridge on Bornholmer Straße appears in four panels. On page 85, Hildebrandt is pictured crossing it into West Berlin, with the bridge itself mimicking the same angle as its position in the photograph (Fig. 3). In the distant background, the viewer sees the Bornholmer Straße S-Bahn Station sign rising up to the right of the bridge. Upon comparing the “on location” photo to this panel, it becomes clear that the same S-Bahn sign is featured in the

photograph, giving the reader clues to understanding the image. However, the S-Bahn sign in the photo is presented on the opposite side, with it towering up from behind the bridge to the left instead of the right. Through the process of comparison, the comic panel thereby provides the reader with the necessary information to interpret the photograph: the reader concludes that the photo in fact presents the opposite side of the bridge, therefore picturing the exit into East Berlin.

The way this photograph retroactively engages not one but two stories across the pages of Buddenberg and Henseler's comic book is striking. Bookending the graphic novel, the Bornholmer Straße bridge features as the border crossing where Regina Zywietz returns home daily to East Berlin by bike before the building of the Berlin Wall as well as the site where Jan Hildebrandt crosses over to the West for the first time on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989. Furthermore, this photograph and similar ones appear as essential reference material for Buddenberg and Henseler, with a total of seven images of the Bornholmer Straße bridge emerging throughout the first and last graphic narratives.

Yet the Bornholmer Straße bridge is never pictured exactly as the reader sees it at the end of this chapter. The photo is therefore neither an image contemporaneous to the graphic narrative in which it is featured, nor—vacant and in black and white—is it a realistic representation of how the reader would experience the bridge today, if they were to visit it themselves as the “on location” section suggests. Instead, we are



Fig. 3. Buddenberg and Henseler, “Jan Hildebrandt: My 18th Birthday,” *Berlin–Geteilte Stadt*, 85.

presented with a timeless version of the historical site that suggests its post-1989 status but doesn't explicitly situate itself temporally. Emptied of important signifiers a reader would need to understand it, this eerie and inexplicably desolate image draws attention to its constructed nature and the artifice of photographic representation.

Moreover, with the image requiring that the reader return to the graphic narrative to seek out the information cues needed to make sense of the photograph, the deficiencies of photography itself—as direct access to the “real”—are called into question, while this movement back and forth between the photograph and the panels leads to a conflation of temporalities. The panel's rendering is historic, but the reference material is contemporary. According to the artists themselves, Buddenberg and Henseler also used contemporary photographs to render their historic imaginings of these sites *in order* to provide the reader with parallels between the site today and before 1989 (Buddenberg and Henseler, Personal Interview). These images were therefore constructed in such a way as to present historic and contemporary understandings of the site simultaneously. In the same way contemporary perspectives shape our understanding of history, so too did the contemporary appearance of these historic monuments shape Buddenberg and Henseler's imagining of them.<sup>13</sup>

A second example of the role of photography as reference material in *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt* makes this relationship between memory and the contemporary imaging or writing of history even more clear. In recreating the geographic landscape for the Holzapfel family's escape to West Berlin, Buddenberg and

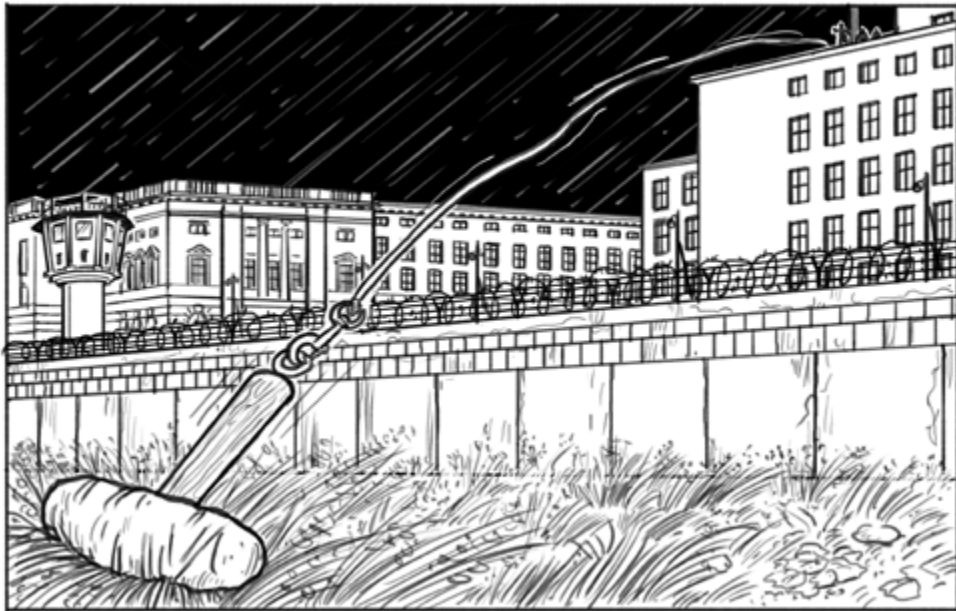


Fig. 4. Buddenberg and Henseler, original panel with watchtower.

Hanseler drew heavily from documentary photographs. When the artists started this chapter, the Holzapfel family sent them a package of personal photos and newspaper clippings, one of which, from the *Bild* newspaper, was reproduced on page 55. Together with photographs housed in the Stasi archives (Die Behörde des Bundesbeauftragten für die Stasi-Unterlagen), blueprints and pictures of the building in the Bundesministerium der Finanzen's collection, photographs taken by the artists themselves, and other Internet and archival documents, Buddenberg and Hanseler reproduced the landscape of the Holzapfel family's escape.

There was one image, however, a newspaper photo (only the sketch of the photo is displayed here), that played a particularly important role. It presented an aerial view of the Holzapfel family's escape route, picturing the building along with a neighboring watchtower. However, upon sending the comic rendition for approval to the family, the Holzapfel family's denied there ever being a watchtower in the vicinity. For if there was, they argued, their escape would have been immediately thwarted. Consequently, Buddenberg and Hanseler removed the watchtower from the panel's space (Figs. 4-5). Even though there exists documentary—and specifically photographic—evidence of the watchtower, the Holzapfel family's experience of the events superseded the photographic notion of factual representation, rendering Buddenberg and Hanseler's inaccurate reproduction of the geographic landscape in fact more authentic to the Holzapfel's experience. In this anecdote, both memory and photographic evidence are called into question, similarly challenging the very possibility of a factual understanding of history.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, while the photograph at the end of every chapter is presented to the reader in order to give them a sense of the geographic site of the graphic narrative's events in real space and real time, as well as gesture towards the historical authenticity of the narrative itself, it in fact does the opposite. Instead the relationship between this photograph and the rendered images within the chapters' pages draw attention to the constructed nature of both comics and photography. Consequently, the tension between photographic and drawn image, as in Spiegelman, Bechdel, and Sacco's deployment of the same aesthetic strategy, calls into question the possibility of authentic representation altogether. This in turn reveals the constructed nature of history itself by highlighting the narrative conventions, mediation, and indexical quality of photographic "evidence," as well as the role of memory and contemporary perspectives in the production of historical meaning. By making claims to factual representation through hand-drawn invocations of the archive, graphic historiography immediately undermines its ability to present historical reality, thereby rendering it a more authentic presentation of lived experience.

When asked about the difference between photojournalism and comics journalism, German comics artist and comics journalist Reinhard Kleist





Fig. 5. Buddenberg and Henseler, "The Holzapfel Family: Ziplining over the Wall," *Berlin-Geteilte Stadt*, 48.

assessed the deficiency of photography as evidence in much the same terms. He noted that in photojournalism, the medium attempts to mask the constructed nature of the image, even when these photographs are meticulously staged and composed (Kleist). Comics journalism, on the other hand, does not pretend that it is an objective representation. Instead, it thematizes the very mediation that photojournalism seeks to obscure, thereby producing an image more true to itself *as a representation*, literally *drawing* attention to its composition and constructed nature. Reproducing photographs by hand in comics weaves such discourses on the politics of representation into graphic historiography. By incorporating the archival document from which the comics panels were drawn—the photograph—the artist(s) emphasizes this connection, while also attempting to claim legitimacy and authenticity in the faithfulness of their representation to historical documents. Graphic historiography thereby, at its core, thematizes the artifice of history itself with every reproduction of artefact, every decontextualized quote and every faithfully drawn archival image.<sup>15</sup> While attempting to establish credibility, it fundamentally denies the very possibility of truth claims.<sup>16</sup> Thus by drawing attention to its own constructed nature, graphic historiography asserts its truthfulness not in its representation of the “real” but in its thematization of the very inability to represent anything “real,” demonstrating that all stories—even histories—are subjective, curated, and constructed.

## Notes

- 1 Comparable characterizations of this body of graphic literature have come from Jeff Adams, who identifies comics that function as critical socialist realist interventions in historical discourse as documentary graphic novels (see *Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism*, 2008), and Wibke Weber and Hans-Martin Rall, who use the term documentary comics for graphic narrative that integrates authentic documents (See “Authenticity in comics journalism. Visual strategies for reporting facts,” 2017). Similarly, Nina Mickwitz in her book of the same name defines documentary comics as “personal responses interwoven with accounts of specific socio-historical issues and contexts” that share an “ambition to mediate actual events and the real world” and incorporate paratextual elements, which collapses the distinctions “journalism,” “reportage,” and “autobiography” (*Documentary Comics*, 2016, pp. 1-2). However, while documentary graphic novels and documentary comics also engage historical events, the body of literature that I discuss here goes beyond intervening in historical debates and integrating archival material by commenting on the very process of writing history.
- 2 This chapter doesn’t examine graphic autobiography by East Germans, which typically has different goals in presenting the subjective experience of the

- author. That work is forthcoming in my book project, but it has also been discussed in my chapter “Coming to Terms with the Past: Teaching German History with the Graphic Novel” (2015).
- 3 While financial support for historically-situated comic book projects is not unusual worldwide (Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* received a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, for example), most funding agencies do not tend to have any affiliation with an organization invested in representing history. However, there exists similar state- and grant-financed initiatives in other parts of post-Soviet Europe.
  - 4 I define the archive here as a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people. My project incorporates both private collections, such as family photo albums, and public archives, such as those housed by organizations with the explicit mission to preserve and disseminate historical information, into its examination of the function of “the archive” in graphic historiography. The present chapter focuses specifically on invocations of institutionalized archives, highlighting the way in which graphic historiography engages both real existing archives, the idea of the institutionalized archive, and the type of images that emerge from archival sources (which also include the internet and mass media).
  - 5 A zipline is an inclined cable or rope with a suspended harness, pulley, or handle, down which a person slides generally for amusement.
  - 6 This project was supported by the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur and through consultation with German historian Christian Halbrock at the Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BStU), German Sociologist and former direction of the Stiftung Berliner Mauer Maria Nooke, and Program Manager of the “Internationales Dissidenten-Lexikon” at the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur.
  - 7 See Hillary Chute’s *Disaster Drawn* (2016) for a discussion on how autobiographical comics function as documents of witness.
  - 8 See the preface and introduction to Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973) for more information, pp. ix-42.
  - 9 Stephen Colbert’s concept of “truthiness” is an interesting correlative to this form of “truth-telling,” where both types of “truth” are constructed through the superficial appearance of fact.
  - 10 *Treibsand*, for example, presents the notes Kahane took during her extensive research, while *Da wird sich nie was ändern!* features an appendage (“Anhang”) that lists the quotes that Loge integrated into her work, and the final page of *Tunnel* 57 lists biographical information on the individuals represented in Henseler and Buddenberg’s “true escape-story.”

- 11 This body of graphic literature is also referred to as graphic memoir, graphic life writing, autobiography (Jared Gardner), autobiographicalography (Lynda Barry) and autographics (Gillian Whitlock).
- 12 In Guibert's *The Photographer*, however, photography is not subordinated to the graphic novel's drawn imagery; they emerge on equal ground with the story unfolding at their intersection, offering the implied promise of "direct witness" through the layering effect of photography and graphic narration (Perdi "When Photographs Aren't Quite Enough" n.p.).
- 13 A similar conflation of temporalities exists in the depiction of London architecture in Alan Moore Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (1999).
- 14 There are analogous moments in *Maus* in which Spiegelman has to weigh the historical record against his father's memory as well as in *Fun Home* in which Bechdel questions her own memory of the events she depicts. In *Maus*, during a debate with his father about the existence of a group of musicians playing at the Auschwitz gate, Spiegelman decides to depict both perceptions, quoting his father's denial while drawing the band anyway. However, when encountering a similar set of circumstances, Buddenberg and Hensler chose to subordinate the photo documentation's depiction of the geographic landscape to the Holzapfel family's memory of the events.
- 15 Unlike in similar examples of photographic "evidence" in Spiegelman, Bechdel and Sacco's work, the hand that holds the photograph or camera is not represented in the panel space. The mechanisms of recording and participating in these events are therefore absent, drawing attention to the process of mediation not through the mediator but through the medium.
- 16 Hatfield writes: "We might call this strategy, then, authentication through artifice, or more simply *ironic authentication*: the implicit reinforcement of truth claims through their explicit rejection. In brief, ironic authentication makes a show of honesty by denying the very possibility of being honest" (125).

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Unlike the rest of *Comics of the New Europe*, this concluding section is comprised of essays addressing four individual nations in the region. The comics scenes represented range from the relatively large and long-established (Poland) to the small and recent (Ukraine). Akin to the countries already examined, these scenes have common roots in 19<sup>th</sup>-century satirical journals, if not earlier. National traditions developed unevenly through the first and second world wars; the period of communist repression set into motion different modes of circulation within the Eastern bloc which permitted state-approved publications such as *Pif*, the children's journal of the French Communist party, to move from West to East. After the fall of the wall post-1989, and in Ukraine's case, post-1991, an initial euphoria among small publishers resulted in the brief flowering of independent comics, followed by a disappointing crash due to the tumult of market reforms. In the post-socialist present day, comics houses that publish in their respective national languages must also compete with the influence of transnational corporate media.<sup>1</sup>

As with the other chapters in this book, the editors see the four essays that follow as shedding light on graphic narrative works which many outside this part of the world have never seen. They each open a dialogue. Along with the other artists, works and national comics scenes discussed throughout this volume, we very much look forward to subsequent scholars following up on such conversations in the years and decades to come.

## Note

- 1 Each of the four essays in this section takes up these common strands and sets off in its own direction. For more comprehensive accounts of comics history in Poland, see Marek Misiora's *Bibliografia komiksów wydanych w Polsce w latach 1905 (1858)-1999* [Bibliography of Comics Published in Poland between 1905 (1858)-1999] and the ongoing comics studies journal *Zeszyty Komiksowe* [Comics Notebooks]; on comics in Hungary, see Szép, Eszter, ed. *Kép-regény-történet: A kilencedik művészet ikonjai Magyarországon*. [The History of Comics: The Ninth Art and Its Icons in Hungary.]; on comics in Romania: Ciobotariu, Alexandru and Dodo Niță. *Istoria benzii desenate românești, 1891-2010* [History of the Romanian Cartoon, 1891-2010]; and on comics in Ukraine: see Pivtorak, Yuliya. "Contemporary Ukrainian Comics: Dimensions of a Hero" and Alaniz, José, "Eastern/Central European Comics."

Ewa Stańczyk

## Women, Feminism and Polish Comic Books: Fraś/Hagedorn's *Totalnie nie nostalgia*

Polish comic art, Jakub Banasiak and Sebastian Frąckiewicz argued in 2012, is hidden behind an invisible wall. The invisible wall, they maintained, separates comic books from other art forms. To remove that imaginary barrier, the two continued, comics needed to be seen “as an immanent and indispensable element of Polish culture, on par with film, literature and the visual arts.”<sup>1</sup>

Calls for the recognition of comics as a “legitimate” art form have been heard for decades, both in Poland and elsewhere. Over the years, it has become something of a cliché in the field of comics studies to argue against the dismissive treatment of the genre. Scholars world-wide have lamented the common association of the comic book with “uneducated” or “unsophisticated” readers (be it children or the working-class), while citing endless arguments for the worthiness of the genre.<sup>2</sup> Cognizant of the precarious cultural status of the comic book, Polish academics too tried to demonstrate its “true value” and rescue it from obscurity, at least rhetorically.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, in Poland, much of the literary production in question has been uneven, to say the least. Only in the past decade have Polish comic books become more widely read and appreciated. With the surfacing of autobiographical graphic narratives, such as Michał Śledziński's *Na szybko spisane* [Quickly Written] (2007-2017), Marzena Sowa's *Marzi* (2007) (written originally in French) and Agata Wawryniuk's *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* [The Polish-English Phrasebook] (2013), comics began to attract different types of readers, who enjoyed and criticized them like any other form of art or literature. The wider debate on what they are and how they function in Polish society is now largely dormant, at least outside the narrow circle of experts.

In those circles, *komiksologia*, or the study of comic books, seems to be blossoming; Polish scholars are publishing valuable work on the history of the genre with regularity. One example is Adam Rusek's excellent *Leksykon polskich*

*bohaterów i serii komiksowych* [The Lexicon of Polish Comic Book Characters and Series] (2010) modelled on foreign publications such as the French *Dictionnaire mondiale de la bande dessinée* [World Dictionary of Comics] (1994) and *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (1998). In the author's own words, the volume is meant to trace the form's "genealogy, development and current status quo."<sup>4</sup> Containing 143 entries, the book provides a description of favorite characters, including Koziółek Matołek (1933), Wicek and Wacek (1946), and Kajko and Kokosz (1972), as well as a discussion of more recent comic book series.

Equally valuable is Marek Misiora's *Bibliografia komiksów wydanych w Polsce w latach 1905 (1858)-1999* [Bibliography of Comics Published in Poland between 1905 (1858)-1999]. The book is a result of Misiora's painstaking efforts to trace the history of the genre, its primary works, along with their publication dates and circulation. Himself an avid enthusiast of the comic book, the author often struggled with a paucity of information on the subject as he tried to piece together the history of the genre. This book-length bibliography of albums, series, newspaper cartoons as well as selected articles on comic books, is a way of rectifying that gap in contemporary *komiksologia*.<sup>5</sup>

The history of comics that emerges from these publications is similar to that of many other Eastern European countries. Beginning in the early twentieth century, comics consisted of satirical newspaper cartoons and illustrated children's stories aimed at the mass reader, such as the famous *120 przygód Koziółka Matołka* [The 120 Adventures of Koziółek Matołek] (1933) by Kornel Makuszyński and Marian Walentynowicz. Under socialism, the genre was initially distrusted due to its association with capitalism, but later the ruling elite exploited the ideological potential of the form to promote their own agenda. Stories praising socialist heroes engaged in the anti-fascist struggle were particularly popular, such as *Kapitan Kloss* [Captain Kloss] and *Podziemny front* [The Underground Front]. By the mid-1970s, there were attempts to provide greater freedom to artists, as exemplified by the Western-style magazine *Relax* which was modelled on the Francophone *Spirou* and *Tintin*, but which published works by Polish artists alone. Of course, much of this production was subsidized by the state and the transition to free market economy after 1989 left many comics artists and publishers struggling.<sup>6</sup>

What is the Polish comic book like today? For the contemporary Polish reader, it means many things. It serves a variety of ideological, political and personal interests, which are not that different from those under state socialism. The term "comic book" encompasses, for example, state-funded educational narratives produced with young audiences in mind, many of which focus on historical events. Topics that adhere to the conservative vision of the national past are often favoured, including stories of Polish victimhood and heroism. Here public institutions, such as the Institute of National Remembrance and the National Centre of Culture, and private publishers, including ZinZin Press, are setting the trend.<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary comic book market also includes fantasy and superhero publications, many of them American imports. Egmont Publishing has been dominating the sector since 1990, when it emerged on the wave of political and economic transition. Around the same time, there was a proliferation of comics magazines. Many of those magazines provided translations of foreign titles, attempting to attract a mass reader hungry for Western culture. And yet, unable to cope with the competition and the underdeveloped readership base, most of these publishing houses quickly folded. Egmont, however, survived the economic vicissitudes and in the past decade turned into one of the most successful publishers in Poland.

And then there are the smaller publishers, established in the 2000s, including *Kultura Gniewu* [The Culture of Anger] and *timof i cisi współnicy* [timof and quiet partners], focusing on original graphic novels from Poland and other countries. The former has published translations of Guy Delisle's and Riad Sattouf's graphic works, as well as many established Polish authors such as Marcin Podolec and Jacek Frąś, whose work I discuss below. The latter publishing house has been translating best-selling works by Alison Bechdel, Craig Thompson, and Cyril Pedrosa.

These smaller publishers—usually enterprises of two or three employees—have low circulations (often below 1,000 copies) and limited income. Thus, despite following a similar tradition and facing comparable problems with reception as their American and Japanese counterparts, we can hardly describe the Polish comic book as a large-scale pop-culture phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> The reader base, too, is different than elsewhere. In fact, it seems much more varied, ranging from history enthusiasts of all ages to literature buffs more generally. And yet, the readership remains low. This nonetheless reflects wider trends of literature consumption rather than a specific lack of interest in graphic narrative.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter focuses on a very particular subgenre which is very new to Poland: the graphic memoir. Specifically, I examine *Totalnie nie nostalgia. Memuar* [Totally Not Nostalgia. A Memoir], published in 2017 and lauded as the country's first graphic memoir. Conceived by a male-female duo—illustrator Jacek Frąś and scriptwriter Wanda Hagedorn—the book can also be placed within the wider tradition of feminist writing. Providing an incisive portrayal of growing up in the oppressive patriarchal society of 1960s Poland, the memoir explores the intersections of gender, family, politics and Polishness. At the same time, the graphic memoir is deeply rooted in the American tradition of feminist graphic memoir that could not be more distant from the Polish context. As I argue here, the critique of Polish patriarchy is undertaken not only at the thematic level but also through intertextual references which reject Polish cultural influence and build upon an intricate network of texts, images and associations that are transcultural and detached from Eastern

European experience. My argument is that the patriarchal represents a form of nationalism, a category which is symbolically purged and destroyed, both personally and culturally, as the main character severs her relationship with her abusive father and her country of origin.

## The Female Perspective

Illustrated by Jacek Fraś, an accomplished artist known for such works as *Glinno* (2004) and *Stan* (2006), and written by newcomer Wanda Hagedorn, *Totalnie nie nostalgia* offers a distinct female voice preoccupied with what could be termed as *kobiece tematy* or “female topics.” The memoir could, in fact, be described as Hagedorn’s graphic autobiography; as such, it blends the aesthetics of the Bildungsroman with a story of emancipation and, eventually, permanent migration. Over the course of the narrative, the protagonist comes of age, questions established social norms, undergoes sentimental and intellectual education, and leaves her home country. In the process, she becomes a liberated woman as well.

The memoir is important not only for its subject matter. It also brings new perspective to the (feminist) comics scene in Poland. Up until now graphic narratives by women and about women have mainly consisted of short form works, sparsely scripted and minimalistic in their use of imagery. For example, Katarzyna Kaczor’s novella *Powroty* [Returns] (2013), consisting of twenty-four pages of black-and-white images, tells an understated story about love, longing, and loneliness as the main character spends fleeting moments with a long-distance partner, witnesses his departure, and once more awaits his return. Agata Bara’s *Ogród* [The Garden] (2012) narrates a war-time secret which affects the life of a family and divides the local community. Drawn in sepia tones and employing hardly any script, the novella (not unlike Kaczor’s work) shows clear reticence to combine word and image. This can be explained by the authors’ background as illustrators and graphic artists working in other sectors, such as advertising (as is the case with Bara), rather than as comic book artists per se.<sup>10</sup> This is not unusual for Poland; some artists admit that they work between design and comic book art.<sup>11</sup> Inevitably, this results in a dearth of relevant visual literacy and experience with the genre which is apparent in many contemporary works. Of course, there is also a shortage of home-grown models that could teach artists the possibilities of graphic narrative. In that sense, many of the works mentioned above are a way of testing the ground and learning how to make contemporary graphic narrative, particularly the kind of comics that represent “everyday experience.”

Some of more recent publications, including Olga Wróbel’s *Ciemna strona księżycy* [The Dark Side of the Moon] (2014), come close to what can be described as a full-

fledged graphic memoir. They also offer a more thoughtful representation of the female experience than mainstream comics. Wróbel's work documents the author's pregnancy and, as such, follows into the footsteps of other female artists who chose to use graphic narrative to speak about that very same experience, most notably A.K. Summers in *Pregnant Butch* (2012).<sup>12</sup> Wróbel's aim is to show pregnancy not merely as the blessed state which, according to popular perception, makes women blossom and turns them into saintly figures, but rather as "nine months of ordinary life, of going to work, where no one cares that I feel sick and sleepy, of arguments with a husband who doesn't necessarily feel like worshipping me or guessing my wishes all the time, of cooking food which you won't feel like eating anyway and of occasional fantasies about a thunderbolt striking your house at night."<sup>13</sup> In that sense, Wróbel breaks the common trend of romanticising pregnancy and motherhood, and honestly speaks about both the positive and negative aspects of her domestic life.

But Polish female graphic novelists do not only focus on intimate themes. They also tackle other important experiences that have wider generational and social resonance. Agata Wawryniuk, for example, looks at Polish migration to Western Europe. In her *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* (2013) she records the opening up of the British job market to Eastern European migrants after the first eastern expansion of the European Union in 2004. Hers is a telling portrayal of the time when cross-border mobility became a daily experience for millions of young Poles departing for the old member states in search of work and adventure.<sup>14</sup>

Correspondingly, it is impossible to speak about the female perspective without discussing how women function as part of the wider comic book scene in Poland. For decades, much of the scene was dominated by male artists. Several scholars point out that this contributed to the rise of common representations of women as sex objects, which meant that credible and psychologically complex female characters were absent, at least before 2000.<sup>15</sup> Speaking of her early days in the comic book scene of the late 2000s, artist Olga Wróbel says that there were very few women visible at the time. But this also distinguished her from other artists and made her debut easier.<sup>16</sup> A similar point is made by Maria Rostocka, the author of *Niedźwiedź, kot i królik* [Bear, cat, and a rabbit] (2012), who finds it surprising how easy it was to get recognition in the comic book world. "Although there is a lot of talk that the scene is dominated by men," she notes, "I don't think this is the case. The art world is much more sexist."<sup>17</sup>

The anthology *Polski komiks kobiecy* [Polish Feminist Comics] (2012) gives weight to those voices and shows that there is a strong group of female authors emerging on the Polish comic book scene. The anthology, which has also been translated into English, presents more than forty young artists, both those mentioned above and others such as Joanna Karpowicz, Sylwia Rostecka, and Dagmara Matuszak, and

represents a diversity of topics and drawing styles. However, as the editor of the anthology maintains, all of those works are unified by a conscious and systematic preoccupation with female concerns, and a desire to make female artists more visible.<sup>18</sup> How does *Totalnie nie nostalgia* fit into this wider context?

### ***Totalnie nie nostalgia***

**W**anda Hagedorn, the author of the script, is not the typical cartoonist: she is neither an illustrator nor a full-time writer. Rather she is an individual on a journey of self-discovery and healing, undertaken through writing, reading and reminiscing. Some of the time, this is a lonely journey, at other times, her mother and three sisters join in, contributing their own memories and, most importantly, talking to Wanda about her writing process and her attempts at “getting even” with their abusive father.<sup>19</sup> Fraś, whose drawings bring the story to life, is absent from the narrative. We find out very little about the collaboration between the two and the painstaking effort of making Hagedorn’s narrative into a graphic memoir. As such, the authors make a clear statement from the start: this is exclusively Wanda’s story.

The memoir begins in the early 1960s in the town of Szczecin, incorporated into Poland following the border shifts of 1945 when the former German lands of Silesia, Pomerania and Warmia-Masuria became part of the newly-established state. As Hagedorn says, this was a typical Polish childhood, characterized by Catholic, patriarchal and socialist “oppression, repression, and depression” (17). Written from the temporal and geographical safety of her Australian adult life, *Totalnie nie nostalgia* is a way of “collecting scraps of memories and recreating a childhood which is recognizable by many Polish women who grew up in the shadow of patriarchy. ... Hagedorn talks about that childhood and about ways of overcoming patriarchy. The first step is to be heard.”<sup>20</sup>

Working through her memories and putting them on paper over the course of four years, Hagedorn-the-author explains how she came to a decision to sever the connection with her abusive father. Before revealing this to the reader in the very last splash page, which depicts the father tending to his apple trees, she reflects on her family relationships and interpersonal problems. One is her parents’ dysfunctional marriage, the leitmotif of the story which shows the disquiet, confusion, and volatility of the home environment. This is juxtaposed with the more positive relationship that young Wanda shares with her grandmother Helena. These two narrative strands recur throughout the plot, shaping the protagonist as a person and structuring her storytelling as a writer.

But Wanda’s story also details her intellectual growth, one that happens predominantly through reading. In that sense, Hagedorn’s narrative can be compared to Ali-

son Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) whose references to Joyce, Proust, Camus, Fitzgerald and others inform Bechdel's own coming of age. In *Totalnie nie nostalgia* too, we are shown how both young and adult Wanda draw comfort from reading. First, as she attempts to verbalize her childhood experience, the adult author delves into feminist writing (names such as bell hooks, Nancy Friday and Carol Hanisch come up at different points in the memoir) and explores the work of Freud, whose discussion of narcissism proves a fruitful way of understanding Wanda's abusive father. The latter, in particular, is accompanied by masterful drawings from Fraś, as the father's image multiplies on the page, alluding to his egotism and self-absorption (154).

Second, reading is a formative part of her childhood. People, events, emotions and experiences are often associated in Wanda's memory with particular books and stories. For example, her grandmother Helena introduces her to erotic novels by the French writer Colette when sharing her own stories of initiation. In that sense, Helena goes against the grain, ignoring the sanctimonious and patriarchal environment of 1960s Poland, and encouraging her granddaughter to be a self-assured and well-informed young woman. The close, loving and stimulating relationship the two share brings to mind similar intergenerational bonds in other graphic memoirs by women such as Marjane Satrapi's highly-acclaimed *Persepolis* (2000) and the more recent *Flying Couch* by Amy Kurzweil (2016). As we look at the young Wanda reading Colette with her grandmother, and sharing moments of familial love and intimacy, we are once more transported to 1960s Poland by Fraś's illustrations. The two women delight in *ptyś*, a typical Polish cake modelled on the French *chou à la crème*, resting proudly on a desert plate (98). Literature is also used to comment on Helena's aging and her progressing Alzheimer's disease. As we see the grandmother aimlessly wander through the park, Hagedorn recalls Simone de Beauvoir's 1970 essay *La Vieillesse* [Aging] about the dismissive treatment of the elderly and their marginalization in society (138).

Reading literature and, more importantly, writing about literature becomes the cure for the author of *Totalnie nie nostalgia*. As she reminisces about and recalls famous works, Hagedorn regains her equilibrium. This is not an unusual strategy in graphic memoirs, particularly those that deal with suppressed childhood traumas. As Diederik Oostdijk shows in his excellent analysis of Miriam Katin's work on overcoming painful experiences of World War II, "multimodal creativity" (be it reading, writing, drawing or even listening to music) "are essential to Katin's finding a hidden wholeness inside herself."<sup>21</sup> In Hagedorn's case too, literary references enable the author to articulate her experience, often using the words of others, and find sense in what initially seems like a confusing puzzle.

And yet, her frame of reference is almost exclusively non-Polish, showing her detachment from the *fatherland*. I argue that those omissions are not



coincidental. Rather, they are aimed at emphasizing the author's conscious rejection of what she sees as that which stymies her growth as a person. Thus, she conflates Polishness with patriarchy and repression. Fraś's drawings further accentuate Wanda's attempts at refuting Polishness and the repressiveness with which she associates her country of origin. If visual allusions to Polish literature or culture ever appear in the memoir, those are usually pushed to the background, becoming part of the scenery, rather than being internalized as an inherent element of Wanda's mental and intellectual development. At times, those references serve as the backdrop for painful memories of physical abuse. For example, a poster advertising a film adaptation of Stefan Żeromski's novel *Popioły* [Ashes] (1902), (compulsory reading in the school curriculum) is pinned to the wall of the young girl's bedroom. However, we might easily miss the poster in the background, as the image of Wanda's father smashing her head on the desk takes centre stage in the panel (163). This, as the author tells us, is punishment for receiving a B in math.

As Hagedorn eliminates Polish cultural references from her narrative, Fraś makes skilful use of period stories to bring the spirit and material culture of the time closer to the reader. Thus, Wanda's coming-of-age narrative is often interspersed with renditions of authentic documents and newspaper clippings. One such source is an inventory of German furniture and appliances purchased by the girl's grandfather from the so-called liquidation commission which had confiscated property from the local Germans expelled in the immediate post-World War II period (34). Another is a leaflet warning the citizens of the invasion of Colorado beetle, an alleged American plot aimed at destroying the socialist economy (46). And finally, there is an article from a children's magazine about Yuri Gagarin, Soviet cosmonaut and the first man in space, which praises his achievements and aims to instil pride in the triumphs of the Warsaw Pact states (62).

And yet, despite Fraś's light-hearted, playful depiction of 1960s reality, the female author's disturbing revelations also demonstrate the seriousness and sensitivity of her representation. Some of those revelations concern Wanda's younger sister, Ania. At one point we find out that Ania was sexually abused by a local priest while preparing for her first communion. One year later, at the age of nine, she was molested by her step-grandfather. Both confessions are prompted by Hagedorn's work on the memoir (57, 174). Other painful recollections (and the graphic portrayals thereof) concern the sustained domestic abuse experienced by Wanda, her mother and sisters. Stories of brutal beatings and persistent bruising are Kafkaesque in their visual rendition, referencing *Metamorphosis*, as Wanda turns into a giant insect savaged by her father with a blizzard of red apples (224-227). She also represents certain collective memories common to her whole generation; for instance, the memory of films about extermination camps with recurring images of stacks of naked corpses which haunted

her as a child (89). These undesirable memories slip into Wanda's consciousness as she tries to work through and disconnect from her childhood. But traumatic memories keep reoccurring, lingering on, reminding her of the uncomfortable, the unwanted, and the repressed aspects of her personal history.

As Hillary Chute argues, the comic book lends itself well to "the movement of memory" or the "excavation of childhood memories", and indeed, many artists have done just that.<sup>22</sup> The abusive parent-child relationship, in particular, recurs in many other works, from Kominsky-Crumb's *Need More Love* (2007) to Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* (2012). Like many of these other women, Wanda refuses to be defeated by her past. Instead, she puts the past on trial and brings justice to herself, her mother and her sisters. By revealing the deeply abusive patriarchal and Catholic environment in which she grew up, the author strikes a familiar cord with many Polish readers. And although the scenes of domestic and institutional violence are shocking, all the more so for their banality and cruel repetitiveness, Wanda is not after retribution, despite her initial claims that this is the case. Rather, she understands her unapologetic memoir as a restorative act. Enabling the victim to speak, *Totalnie nie nostalgia* is as much about finger-pointing as it is about healing through writing and visualizing painful experiences, for herself and, possibly, for others with similar childhoods.

Wanda's Australian life, away from her country of origin and her abusive father, is part of the cure. Here she feels fulfilled and liberated, unburdened by the national-conservative mythology of her birth country, with its social conventions and responsibilities towards family members who gave her anything but love. Her active lifestyle and engagement in women's empowerment projects brings a sense of purpose and direction to her life. And while the memory of her father does not leave her until the very end of the story, the Australian Wanda cannot be further from the young Polish girl we see earlier in the memoir. She becomes the woman her grandmother wanted her to be: strong, independent, intelligent, and self-assured.

## Conclusion

**T***otalnie nie nostalgia* stands out among other Polish graphic memoirs written by women: not only does it present as painfully honest in a way that makes the reader feel both uncomfortable and deeply moved, but it is also beautifully drawn and scripted. It is hopeful, too, as Wanda and her sisters triumph over the domineering father by excluding him from their lives. Despite the demoralizing history of abuse, the four women manage to sustain the love and affection they had for each other as children. Their sisterly bonds endure time and geographical distance, growing stronger over the course of Hagedorn's memoir. As the women talk, reveal uncomfortable truths and publicly share their girlhood secrets, the

memoir becomes a thoughtful rejection of the hypocrisy and philistinism in which the young Wanda and her sisters grew up. Here those qualities have a distinctly patriarchal, Catholic and socialist face—the three pillars of repression that need to be rejected and rhetorically destroyed in order to attain closure. Once more, the view of the ocean and Wanda’s safe Australian life bring her peace and enable her to regain equilibrium after the mentally exhausting process of writing. Although the ghost of the father has been (seemingly) expunged, in the end the last ironic splash page is still devoted to him: the abuser becomes a tree hugger, tending lovingly to his fruit trees, vegetable patches and flowers.

## Notes

- 1 Jakub Banasiak and Sebastian Frąckiewicz, „W tym szczególnym momencie. Polski komiks u progu drugiej dekady XXI wieku”, in Sebastian Frąckiewicz, *Wyjście z getta. Rozmowy o kulturze komiksowej w Polsce* (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie 4000 malarzy, 2012), 9.
- 2 See, for example, Sarah Ziolkowska and Vivian Howard, “‘Forty-one-year-old female academics aren’t supposed to like comics!’: The Value of Comic Books to Adult Readers”, in *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives: Essays on Readers, Research, History and Cataloging*, ed. by Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 163.
- 3 Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, *Sztuka komiksu* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1985), 6. See also Jerzy Szyłak, *Komiks w szponach miernoty: rozprawy i szkice* (Warszawa: Timof Comics, 2013).
- 4 Adam Rusek, *Leksykon polskich bohaterów i serii komiksowych* (Poznań: Centrala, 2010), 4.
- 5 See Marek Misiora, *Bibliografia komiksów wydanych w Polsce w latach 1905 (1858)-1999* (Poznań: Centrala, 2010), 5.
- 6 For a general study of the history of Polish comic books, see Wojciech Obremski, *Krótką historia sztuki komiksu w Polsce (1945-2003)* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2005). For publications focusing on specific subgenres and periods, see, for example, Adam Rusek, *Tarzan, Matolek i inni. Cykliczne historyjki obrazkowe w Polsce w latach 1919-1939* (Warszawa : Biblioteka Narodowa, 2001). For a more specialist book-length study of representations of Polish national history in comic books, see Justyna Czaja, *Historia Polski w komiksowych kadrach* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2010).
- 7 I devote more attention to this topic in Ewa Stańczyk “‘Long Live Poland!’: Representing the Past in Polish Comic Books,” *Modern Language Review* 109/1 (2014): 186-206.
- 8 Banasiak and Frąckiewicz, “W tym szczególnym momencie. Polski komiks u progu drugiej dekady XXI wieku”, 10-11.

- 9 See Witold Tkaczyk, "Rynek niewielki, ale już normalny. Szkic do analizy obiegu komiksowego w Polsce w ostatnich 20 lat - jako przyczynek do rozwoju empirycznego aspektu komiksologii", in Krzysztof Skrzypczyk, *Komiks a komiksologia. Ku rozpoznaniu i charakterystyce wzajemnych relacji między gatunkiem a jego teorią* (Łódź: Łódzki Dom Kultury, Międzynarodowy Festiwal Komiksu i Gier, 2010), 85.
- 10 See, for example, Sebastian Frąckiewicz, "Panie przodem", *Polityka* 11 (13 March 2013), 90-93.
- 11 See Agata "Endo" Nowicka, "Mam poczucie totalnego farta. Rozmowa z Agatą 'Endo' Nowicką, ilustratorką i twórczynią komiksów", in Frąckiewicz, *Wyjście z getta*, 72.
- 12 In Poland, Agata "Endo" Nowicka's *Projekt: człowiek* (Project Human) (2006) is the first such work. Here Nowicka uses her signature pixel art, developed over the years on her Komix Blog, to document the nine months of her pregnancy. The story had been originally serialized in *Wysokie Obcasy*, the weekend magazine for women of the main Polish newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and was only later published as an album. Another work on a similar topic is Dominika Węclawek's *Czwórka na pokładzie* (Four on Board) (2010).
- 13 Olga Wróbel, "Poślowie", in *Ciemna strona księżycy* (Poznań: Centrala, 2014), np.
- 14 I look at this comic book in more detail in Paolino Nappi and Ewa Stańczyk, "Women Cross Borders: Economic Migration in Contemporary Italian and Polish Comic Books", *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6/3 (2015): 230-245. For another study of Wawryniuk's memoir in the context of the wider representations of economic migration in Polish literature, see Kris Van Heuckelom, "Praca fizyczna z różowymi akcentami. Polskie doświadczenie migracyjne w powieści graficznej *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* Agaty Wawryniuk", *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2016): 81-97.
- 15 Monika Szafrąńska, "Kobieta w komiksie - bohater drugiej kategorii", in Daria Adamowicz, Yulia Anisimovets, Olga Taranek, "*Gorsza*" *kobieta. Dyskursy inności, samotności, szaleństwa* (Wrocław: Sutoris, 2008), 63. See also Danuta Serkowska, "Kobieta w komiksie. Od Amazonki do...jokera", *Zeszyty Komiksowe* 3 (2005): 5. For a detailed discussion of the eroticization of women in Polish comic books, see also Jerzy Szyłak, *Komiks i okolice pornografii. O seksualnych stereotypach w kulturze masowej* (Gdańsk: Akia, 1996).
- 16 Olga Wróbel, "Dwie rozmowy z Olgą Wróbel: luty 2010 i maj 2012 roku", in Kinga Kuczyńska, *Polski komiks kobiecy* (Warszawa: timof i cisi współpracownicy, 2012), 57.
- 17 Frąckiewicz, "Panie przodem", 93.
- 18 Kuczyńska, "Zakończenie", in *Polski komiks kobiecy*, 62.
- 19 Wanda Hagedorn and Jacek Frąś, *Totalnie nie nostalgia. Memuar* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Komiksowe, Kultura Gniewu, 2017), 11.
- 20 Paulina Domagalska, "Świetny komiks 'Totalnie nie nostalgia': PRL bez złudzeń, ale - niestety - z ojcem", *Gazeta Wyborcza* (27 January 2017).
- 21 Diederik Oostdijk, "'Draw yourself out of it': Miriam Katin's graphic metamorphosis

of trauma”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 17/1 (2018): 89.

- 22 Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women. Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.

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José Alaniz

## Igor Baranko and National Precarity in Ukrainian Comics

In summer 2017, a visitor to Moscow strolling the historic Arbat pedestrian mall would have glimpsed an unusual sight: a multi-poster display, stretching several meters, devoted to the construction of a bridge. Not, of course, just any bridge, but the structure over the Kerch Strait meant to link mainland Russia to the peninsula of Crimea. “We Are Building a Bridge,” announced the title poster, in bold caps over an aerial shot of the gleaming steel span in progress. “The Crimean Bridge is the dream of generations. We have been thinking of the possibility of uniting Crimea with the Caucasus since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>1</sup>

A tourist might be forgiven their puzzlement over such a grandiose encomium to an infrastructure project, however impressive—indeed the construction posed considerable logistical challenges: twelve miles long, over difficult terrain and stormy weather.<sup>2</sup> But these were not the reason for the triumphant language, which had more to do with the fact that, just over three years prior, Crimea itself had belonged to another country, Ukraine, in whose Eastern region Russia was embroiled in a violent insurgency against Kyiv.

The Arbat outdoor photo exhibit did a commendable job of completely eliding the neo-imperialist context of the bridge: in addition to militarily supporting separatists in the predominantly Russian-speaking Ukrainian East (a conflict which has claimed over 10,000 lives and displaced more than 1.5 million), Russia had illegally annexed Crimea in 2014 after a hastily-staged referendum with Russian troops already on the ground; the action led to international sanctions which have seriously damaged the Russian economy, and which remain in place today. Instead, the exhibit appealed to nationalism, patriotic pride and the notion that the peninsula had never really been Ukrainian to begin with—a sentiment captured by Russian president Vladimir Putin when he remarked in a spring, 2014 address: “Crimea has always been an integral part of Russia in the hearts and minds of our people” (Yaffa).<sup>3</sup>



The Ukrainian challenge to Moscow's hegemony, most recently through its 2014 Euromaidan Revolution which ousted a Russian-backed president, represents both a remarkable assertion of its people's aspirations to reorient the country towards Western Europe and align itself with the EU, as well as a profound blow to Russia's geopolitical influence. But with the war in the East dragging on, continued Russian meddling and few of the revolution's hopes fulfilled, Ukraine remains a divided nation. Given these pressures, some question whether it will last in its present form at all, but rather split into its Western-facing Ukrainian-speaking portion (including the capital Kyiv and Lviv) and its Russian-dominated East (Lugansk, Donetsk, Crimea).<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines such anxieties over national precarity as expressed in Ukrainian comics, a scene still in its infancy. I focus on the work of graphic novelist Igor Baranko, which exemplifies the postcolonial themes we have been touching on through adult fantasies of alternate histories which defy both the fixedness of the past and the menace of the future, thus opening new possibilities—or, more pessimistically, indulging in an elaborate form of denial. Baranko's oeuvre, and as I will argue Ukrainian comics in general, put on display the anxieties of a country with no solid footing and, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no secure path forward.

## Years and Years of Living Dangerously

Author Oksana Zabuzhko, in her 1996 novel *Pol'ovi doslidzhennia z ukrains'koho seksu* [Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex], captured the mood of national insecurity in the line: “Ukrainian choice is a choice between nonexistence and an existence that kills you” (46). Historian Mark von Hagen posed a similar conundrum in a provocatively titled 1995 essay, “Does Ukraine Have a History?” Only if the country had a history, he argued, could it have a future. In other words, by being the subject, not the object, of history.

But establishing that history has proven elusive, since the major European powers have long diminished Ukrainian sovereignty claims to advance their own imperialist ambitions. Whether at the hands of the Russians, who trace their civilization to Kiyvan Rus,<sup>5</sup> or of the Third Reich, who annexed the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in the name of *Lebensraum* (Snyder 19-20, Plokhy 259-260), the territory which today goes by that name has served as battleground and spoils for larger and better-equipped states. The country's current borders date back to only 1945 (in the case of Crimea 1954 or, if so inclined, 2014) and despite attempts to paint a direct line back to the Cossack Hetmanate of the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Ukrainian historians have failed to definitively substantiate a Ukrainian identity from the pre-modern period, lacking state/national continuity. Von Hagen concludes, “Today's Ukraine is a very modern creation, with little firmly established precedent in the national past” (667).<sup>6</sup>

What all these matters return us to, of course, is the uncertain identity, existence and recognition—or disdain—of Ukraine itself in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Yet even as part of the USSR, the Ukrainian state found itself subordinated, its “backwater” capital Kyiv starved of attention, resources and contacts with the West (von Hagen 663), its self-determination undermined with campaigns to discourage the use of the Ukrainian language and “propagation of the stereotype of Ukrainian culture as second-rate and mediocre” in the 1930s and again in the 1970s (Chernetsky 49).<sup>7</sup> Its people suffered enormous physical harm as well. To punish peasant resistance to the collectivization of agriculture, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin launched a plan to seize Ukrainian harvests in the early 1930s, creating an artificial famine. The *Holodomor* (famine) killed as many as 3.9 million people. At its height, denizens of Ukrainian cities such as Kharkiv grew inured to the sight of starved corpses on the streets (Conquest, Applebaum). Soviet suspicions over Ukraine’s loyalties flared up during and after World War II, when the so-called Ukrainian Insurgent Army fought against Moscow’s rule in the 1940s and 1950s, even collaborating with the Germans during the war (Plokhy 280-284). (Contemporary denunciations of some Kyiv-supporting fighters and politicians in the current Eastern conflict as “fascists” stem in part from that history; see De Ploeg 157).

When in November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich backtracked from an association agreement with the European union in favor of stronger ties to Russia, thousands gathered in Kiev’s Independence Square in opposition. Over the course of the winter the protests turned violent, sparking the 2014 “Euromaidan”<sup>8</sup> Revolution that toppled Yanukovich. Petro Poroshenko was elevated to the presidency in May, 2014, but he inherited a crisis: massive public debt, the loss of Crimea (annexed by Russia), and a secessionist war in the east led by pro-Russian militias (not-so-secretly assisted by the Russian military).

Given all the foregoing, Putin’s project to span the Kerch Strait starts to look less like a bridge and more like a tentacle.<sup>9</sup>

Across the centuries, the pattern holds: Ukraine’s very survival, always tenuous, is routinely threatened by either all-out invasion or the machinations of outside powers (mostly Russia) exploiting its ethno-religious fault lines. Today, such a situation and the country’s response render it a compelling example of a resistant postcolonial state in a region of the world still dominated by past and present Russian imperialism.

## **Contemporary Comics in Ukraine: Postcolonial in Practice**

**L**ike the nation itself, Ukrainian comics emerged from the shadow of a much larger cultural sphere, namely Russia’s. Under the Soviets, the most important satirical journal, *Perets* [Pepper, launched in 1927] featured cartoons; it was however published

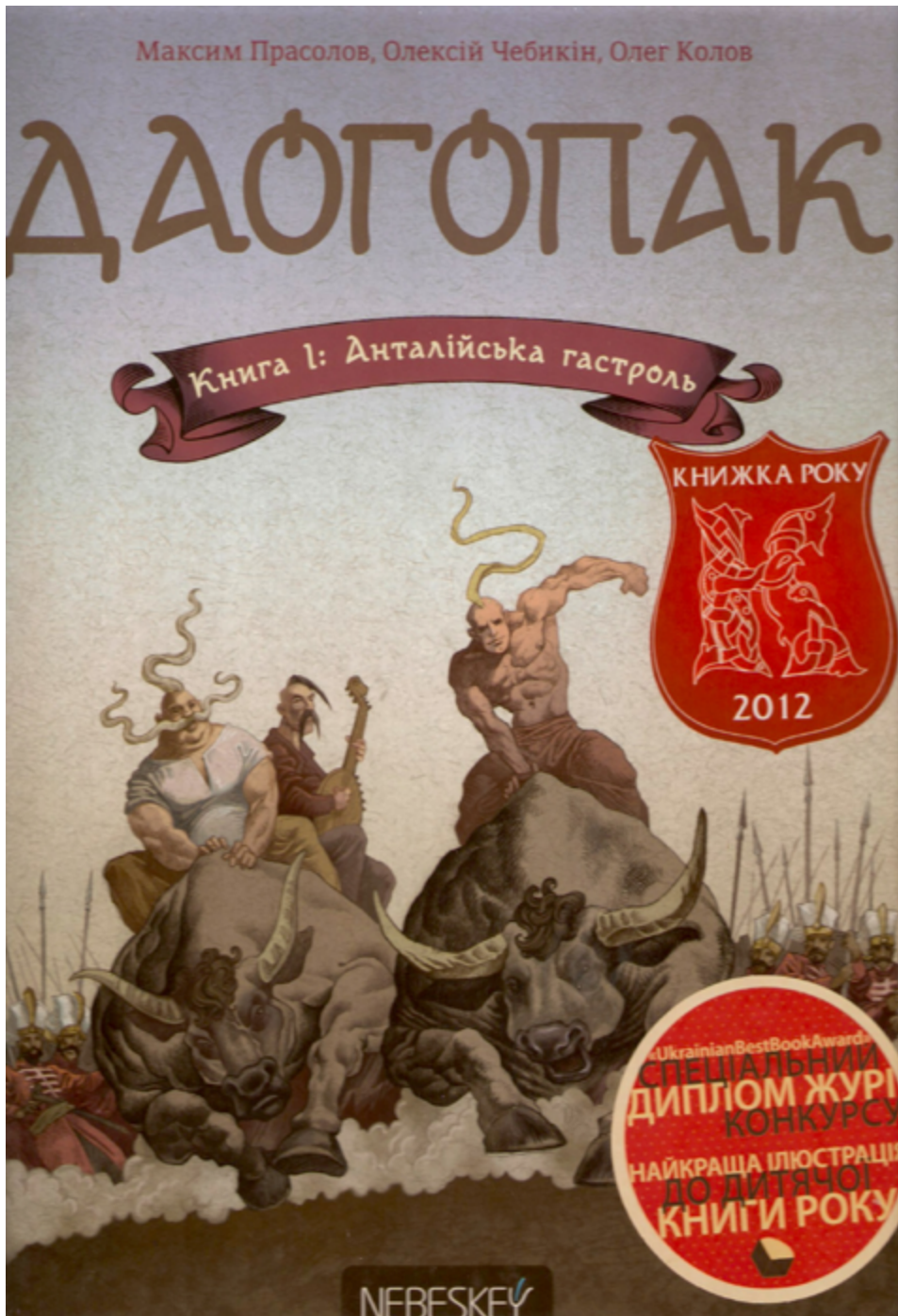


Fig. 1. *Daohopak*, a historical fantasy set in the 17th century by Maksim Prasolov, Oleksiy Chebykin and Oleg Kolov.

in the Ukrainian language. The French communist party children's journal *Pif Gadget* and Eastern European bloc publications such as *Galaktika* (Hungary) and *Stripoteka* (Yugoslavia) exposed readers to comics, though the form remained politically suspect throughout the Soviet era.<sup>10</sup> With the collapse of the USSR, pioneering Ukrainian comics journals appeared, such as *Nash* [Ours, launched 1999] and *K-9* (2003-2009).<sup>11</sup> The short-lived *K-9* Comics Festival debuted in Kyiv in 2005, under the auspices of Ninth World press, publisher of the journal. More recently, the Odessa-based publisher Eugenios, with its eponymous journal (launched 2007) and Kyiv's Nebeskey Press have become key players in what remains a small comics market.

Notable Ukraine-based comics artists include Alexei Lipatov, whose *Stalin vs. Hitler* (2000)<sup>12</sup> restages the antagonism between the country's Western and Eastern nemeses as a superhero slugfest, literalizing Van Hagen's contention that "For both German and Russian historiography, east and central Europe existed primarily as 'the borderlands' over which they competed in occasional geopolitical struggles" (660-661)<sup>13</sup>; Yevgeny Pronin, whose *Katya and Dead* (1999) spins a futuristic adventure tale in which the titular Uncle Dead sports a Cossack *oseledets'* hairstyle and speaks in *surzhyk* (a non-standard spoken vernacular mixing Russian and Ukrainian); and Maxim Bogdanovsky, all from Dnipropetrovsk. Kyiv's Oleksiy Chebykin published an important work of historical fiction, *Novyi Borisfen* [The New Boristhenes], in 1994. Georgii "Zhora" Litichevsky, a prominent Russian cartoonist and fine artist active since the 1970s, also hails from Dnipropetrovsk. Another active figure in the Russian scene, Andrei "Drew" Tkalenko, who co-created the graphic novel *Sterva* [Bitch, 2010], emigrated from Kharkiv.<sup>14</sup>

2012, a pivotal year for Ukrainian comics, brought the debut of the ComArt Festival in Kyiv, along with the manga series *Hakken Seimei*. On the Bus, one of the first comics shops in the country, opened in Odessa in 2013, while the third and largest festival, ComicCon, launched in Kyiv in 2015, attracting over 10,000 visitors (Pivtorak 2). Many recent comics exhibit explicitly nationalist traits, perhaps none more so than the graphic novel series *Daohopak*,<sup>15</sup> a historical fantasy set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Maksim Prasolov, Chebykin and Oleg Kolov, which burnishes the hyper-masculine image of the Cossacks<sup>16</sup> as national heroes on par with Japanese Samurai, Nordic Vikings and US cowboys.<sup>17</sup> The first volume, *Antaliis'ka gastrol'* [The Antalya Tour, 2012], introduces the bulky, shirtless hero Skorovoda<sup>18</sup> and his friends on a rescue mission to what is now modern-day Turkey (Fig. 1). Yet for all the traditionalist trappings, as Yuliya Pivtorak argues, "Cossacks we see in the comics are the product of modern visual mythology (or global visuality - [sic] they have good-looking and perfectly trained bodies, they know technical [sic] and possess magical tricks, they are well-dressed, well-connected and well-read. These Cossacks have a lot more in common with the Marvel characters than with folk paintings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century" (3-4).

Pivtorak sees Ukrainian comics as a transnational and paradigmatic postcolonial practice, whereby new potentialities of identity, modernity and public culture enter the mainstream.<sup>19</sup> I would add that the non-finalizing cross-discursivity of graphic narrative—what Chute calls its capacity to offer “ethical representation without problematic closure” through its “expansive visual/verbal grammar” (2009, 352)—offers a potent tool for destabilizing entrenched notions of “Ukrainianness,” even if in practice highly gendered works like *Daohopak* leave the knotty linkage between male prowess and national vitality unexamined. For Pivtorak, the postcolonial comic, “a set of texts which intend to make a revision of history and reclaim the national history” (4), nonetheless advances an important task of de-colonization. She writes:

Graphic writing, particularly enabled by complex signifying recourses, may be seen as an effective category of “postcolonial textuality” making visible the colonial legacies and re-writing the missing or misinterpreted identities in their precise contexts. Moreover, it could be proposed that postcolonial comics are uniquely able to perform the characteristic “deconstructive image functions” (4).<sup>20</sup>

Or as *Daohopak* author Prasolov puts it more colloquially: “Ukrainian culture is colonized by and filled with images imposed from the outside. That’s why this graphic novel series [is] aimed to replace this existing picture with ‘our own version’ of history based on the ‘real facts’” (quoted in Pivtorak 5).

While presentation of “real facts” seems a dubious claim for Prasolov et al.’s trilogy, which features magic, impossible physical feats and talking animals, such definitely do not constrain *The Will* (2017), a steampunk alternate history co-written by Vyacheslav Bugayev and drawn by Aleksei Bondarenko, which depicts a world where the short-lived Ukrainian People’s Republic (1917-1921) never fell. Published by Asgardian Comics, the graphic novel (part of a planned series) depicts a war for national survival against a cyborg Lenin and his Bolshevik zombie hordes. The book received a huge public relations boost when President Poroshenko himself purchased a copy while visiting the Knizhny Arsenal book festival in 2017 (“Triller o voine”).

The project certainly got the Russian press’ attention, too, prompting even comics artist and avid blogger Daniil Kuzmichev to contemptuously sneer: “[S]uch dreams result from the fucked-upness (khuevnost’) of contemporary life. Look at us, we [Russians] are feeling nostalgic about some Stalin or other, while the Ukrainians do the same even with Skoropadsky<sup>21</sup> (not with the German invaders too?) (Kuzmichev).” The Kremlin-controlled media hardly gave it a better reception. During one Russian current events talk show devoted to *The Will* on Channel One, an audience member denounced it as “crude, malicious nationalist Ukrainian propaganda” (“Ukrainskiy komiks”). It only underscored the raw feelings on both sides of the Ukraine/Russia

divide that of all things, a comic book—among the most marginal of cultural productions in both countries—could provoke such a heated response.

## Igor Baranko and National Precarity

Given the foregoing, it should come as little surprise that the most well-known and successful Ukrainian comics artist, Igor Baranko (b. 1970, Kyiv)<sup>22</sup> often creates narratives that disrupt smooth historical continuity and cast doubt on the nation's very ontology, troubling its past, present and future. In his works, reality itself is never guaranteed to last.

Baranko's baroque, psychedelia-influenced line art and adult scifi-fantasy stories, his publication in *Metal Hurlant* (in collaboration with Alejandro Jodorowsky and Jean-Pierre Dionnet, among others), as well as his work for the French Humanoids Press, have made him a cult favorite. Critics have often focused on the "weirdness" of Baranko's comics (reminiscent of Moebius), from his humorous alternate reality epics *Pifitos: A Newly Found Unknown Poem of Homer* (Slave Labor Graphics, 2001) and *Skaggy the Lost* (SLG, 2005) to his more recent "serious" graphic novels like *Shamanism* (2014, originally *La Danse du Temps*, 2005-2006, both Humanoids). Alongside the "weirdness," they exhibit a near-obsessive preoccupation with the theme of history,<sup>23</sup> often in the sort of tragic, dystopian key not uncommon in the animation and graphic narrative of former Soviet bloc countries.

Baranko, however, goes further than most, to fantastic scenarios which foreground the contingency and malleability of past events; *Shamanism*, for example, imagines a world where the European conquest of the Americas never happened—yet this "solution" to genocide also finds itself in constant danger of being mystically "danced away." *Jihad* (2012, originally *The Horde*, 2003-2004, both Humanoids) combines science fiction with Sufism, Buddhism and futureshock for its tale of a Russian dictator in 2040 scheming to restore Genghis Khan's Golden Horde, in hopes of conquering Asia and Europe—including a free and independent Ukraine. How Baranko approaches national identity through alternate but "fragile" realities, and how this theme resonates with Ukraine's post-Soviet existential crises, grounds my analysis.

*Shamanism*, at first glance, would seem to have nothing to do with Baranko's home country<sup>24</sup>: lushly illustrated, with meticulously-researched, distinctive details of dress, technology, decorative arts and architecture, the graphic novel imagines a parallel America populated by innumerable Native American nations some 200 years after the point wherein in our world's Columbus landed. No industry has despoiled nature, and the various tribes live in uneasy peace, still practicing their ancient traditions (such as bride kidnapping). So it happens that the braggart Lakota warrior Four Winds makes off with the Pawnee princess Moon-in-the-Clouds, an event



**Fig. 2.** Four Winds keeps recklessly changing history until he succeeds in kidnapping Moon-in-the-Clouds in Baranko's *Shamanism*.

undone by the medicine woman She-Who-Slithers-Like-a-Snake, who for her own reasons has the princess killed. The incensed Four Winds sets off to find the Paiute people, “masters of time,” to “go back in time and start over from the beginning”

(27). From the Pauite elders he learns that ten generations before one of their tribe, Wovoka, had initiated the Ghost Dance so as to rid the world of the Wasicu, pale skins who had come from across the sea and destroyed the land, turning people away from the Great Spirit (32).

Baranko bases this account on real people and events, namely the Ghost Dance of 1890, which took place at the Great Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, led by the Pauite Wovoka (aka Jack Wilson) and Lakota Chief Sitting Bull, to reverse time and bring back the world before the arrival of the whites. Messianism of this sort is not uncommon among colonized peoples, as noted by historian Rani-Henrik Andersson:

Such movements mainly aimed at getting rid of the dominant culture and restoring traditional ways of living. Through religion and religious ceremonies and with the help of a religious prophet, the object was to bring about a new world without the conquerors. Typically, the destruction of the world was prophesied; it would then be replaced by a new paradise promised by the prophet or messiah ... The fact that, in the Native Americans' case, the whites are excluded from the new world does not necessarily reflect hatred toward the whites. Very often it simply symbolizes the fulfillment of the expected return of the old ways of life (24).

*Shamanism* thus takes place in a reality where the 1890 Ghost Dance succeeded—a veritable Native American utopia. Nonetheless, the rash anti-hero Four Winds wishes to re-perform the ritual for his own personal ends, so that he may have another chance to steal the princess, and convinces the elders to help him. His repeated failures to win Moon-in-the-Clouds (Slithers assassinates her, she kills herself, her guards stop him, etc.) prompt Four Winds to recklessly keep changing history until he succeeds (Fig. 2). We see the kidnapping replayed in variations, twice without textboxes or sound effects, from different angles, which imparts a “timelessness” effect (6-9, 37).<sup>25</sup> Significantly, the third and final attempt (45-46), in which Four Winds himself is captured by the Pawnee, greatly affects the trajectory of his life (for one thing, it leads to his dawning maturity and the taking on of the burden to correct his earlier disturbance of the timeline)—and this is the version of history we stay with for most of the novel.

A number of influences went into *Shamanism*, Baranko told me (2017), from reading Golden Age and classic science fiction, including alternate reality narratives such as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962); to immersing himself in Native American history<sup>26</sup> while living in the US in the early 2000s; to Márquez-style Magical Realism, which Frederic Jameson considers the postcolonial literary mode *par excellence*, due to its fixation on “history with holes, perforated history” (Jameson, *Signatures*, 179).<sup>27</sup> But Four Wind's near-paranoid preoccupation with



the return of the “bad past” of the white demons (brought about by his abuse of the Ghost Dance) reminds us of the fundamentally “reactionary” nature of science fiction’s parallel reality trope. As Kathleen Singles explains:

Alternate histories reflect the postmodern tension between artificiality and authenticity, but they do not deny the existence of a real past, nor do they deny the validity of a normalized narrative of the real past. Rather than challenge our notions of history, or call into question our ability to know the past through narrative, they conservatively support the normalized narrative of the real past. ... The point of divergence relies upon the principle of contingency, while the continuing variance from the normalized narrative of the real past—that is, the rest of the narrative—relies on the principle of necessity (7-9).

In other words, though *Four Winds* alters events through the Ghost Dance, remaking history over and over to suit his desires, the pattern is one of repetition with only minor difference (once we eliminate the whites), following “the principle of necessity.” Moreover, the continuities with our own “real” world take on an uncanny cast. For example, the map of the “large sleeping turtle” which the Iroquois Toad-Who-Croaks shows *Four Winds* (77) is recognizable as a depiction of North America—though of course tribes replace states and national borders (what we know as Florida is here the “kingdom of the Powhatan,” etc.). More disturbing, the white devils are not really eliminated; what we regard as the “true” history (our history, reader), keeps threatening to return, to break through into the reality of *Shamanism*. As an elder warns, “The world that the Wasicu demons took hold of still exists. If you stir up time again, you could disappear where the prophet Wovoka erred and where the dance of the spirits has no effect ... and believe me, there is *nothing* worse” (41).<sup>28</sup>

Hence the graphic novel evokes its own “ghost dance”: we remain aware of what really happened even as we relish Baranko’s highly detailed alternate storyworld (let’s face it, a preferable if romanticized vision tailor-made to assuage white guilt). This makes for an intensely Gothic reading experience; our own fallen reality haunts the Edenic reality of *Four Winds*, who laments, “[I]t’s my fault they’re here. When I danced the dance of the spirits, I must not have properly closed the door leading to our world ...” (78). This historical unconscious takes shape in our hero’s glimpses of the world of the Wasicu, where “all inhabitants live in large rectangular boxes and ... listen to the orders issued from their square little boxes” (43, my ellipsis). It arises in the form of Don Juan Alonso, a Cervantes-loving Spaniard, descendant of the failed conquistadors (85); the white man’s weapons left behind from that abandoned mission, such as Alonso’s rapier (105-106 and *passim*), cannons (85-86) and the rifle Moon-in-the-Clouds uses to kill her father in a dream (90); and a US half-dollar coin, emblazoned with an eagle (100).<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 3. Marauding armies from the East overwhelm the Slavic lands over and over through the centuries in Baranko's *Jihad*.

Worse, various figures, from Toad-That-Croaks to the Navajo He-Who-Has-Blood-On-His-Hands, lust after the white man's weapons so as to dominate others—the pattern of conquest once more trying to reassert itself. The reformed Four Winds thus takes on the mission to close the “breach in time” and keep the whites out, lest they “swallow up the world” (105). Which as we know, they did. In *Shamanism*, Baranko



Fig. 4. *Jihad's* climax takes place in and around the Soviet-era Motherland Monument in Kyiv.

betrays a pessimistic, deterministic view, which as Singles argues, the alternate history trope ultimately reinscribes as a matter of course. *Pace* Joyce, there is no waking up from history's nightmare.<sup>30</sup>

In *Shamanism*, Baranko saves the “new” world from European conquest—but, as with his homeland, no salvation is ever secure, or lasting. The constant threat of national annihilation certainly permeates his dystopian graphic novel *Jihad* as well, which, though produced only a couple of years earlier, seems the raw work of a much younger artist, less sure of his expressive powers. Convuluted, with many intersecting plotlines spanning the Eurasian land mass and higher states of being; characters that never meet (at least on Earth), though they affect each other mightily; a dozen-strong ensemble cast; clones of Isaac Newton and Abraham Lincoln; and a Lenin resurrected by UFOs,<sup>31</sup> *Jihad* presents a daunting challenge for any thorough analysis.<sup>32</sup> Here I will restrict myself to the most relevant strands and themes.

Ivan Apelsinov, failed scifi writer<sup>33</sup> and absolute dictator of Russia in 2040, comes to embrace a mix of Pan-Mongolism<sup>34</sup> and Buddhism as an ideology of conquest, whereby he may reincarnate Genghis Khan and the Golden Horde that swept to power in the Middle Ages, which he considers the true ancestors of the nation. Determined to incorporate Khan's warring spirit into his own body, he sends a team of NKVD<sup>35</sup> operatives to infiltrate the free nation of Ukraine, “the last bastion of peace and progress” (56), and bring back to life the remains of an influential lama buried there in the 1930s, who holds the secret to the entire scheme. Meanwhile, a lone, devout Chechen named Jhokhar<sup>36</sup> wanders the land, trying to “find the way to the Heavenly Chechnya” (22), since the physical one was bombed out of existence by a Russian nuclear strike during the 2030 “Third Chechen War” (14).<sup>37</sup>

A mood of paranoia, mysticism and black humor permeates the story, which accentuates the precarity of Ukraine itself, a nexus of spiritual energies that makes it a tantalizing prize for would-be conquerors. As the crone Shakti Noyon explains, Ukraine “is the crack between worlds. The crack between Russia and Europe, East and West, the left and right hemispheres of the brain ...” (98),<sup>38</sup> a supernatural reification of the country as a site of contention between larger powers. Baranko visually dramatizes the quandary through a page of three panels, each stretching full-length, which show invading armies sweeping in from the East, overwhelming the Slavic lands: in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Scythians; in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, the Huns; in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Mongols. “Every thousand years,” marvels Apelsinov, “... and always the same territories ...” (34). (Fig. 3) In Baranko's cyclical view of historical trauma and national threat, the hordes assail, overrun again and again. As in *Shamanism's* repeated scenes of Four Winds trying to kidnap Moon-in-the-Clouds, *plus ça change ...*

Other, more down-to-earth expressions of disdain towards the author's homeland sting no less for their banality. As the train carrying the Russian agents approaches

the border, their cabin's radio plays a patriotic program (in Ukrainian): "... Because of its geographical and political situation, Ukraine is the only neutral state left in Europe after the failure of globalization in the year 2024." The agent Nikolai's only comment: "I hate Ukrainian. It sounds like a parody of Russian.<sup>39</sup> Why do we still put up with their independence?" (56).

Significantly, *Jihad's* climax takes place in and around the Motherland Monument, an actual structure dedicated in 1981, now part of the Museum of the History of Kyiv in World War II (Fig. 4). The 203-foot (62m) "mother" figure holds a sword and upraised shield, which up to the present still bears the emblem of the Soviet Union. This site of a disgraceful colonialist past holds the tomb of *sulde*, "a god's thirst for power, for domination" (73). It is thus also the incubator of a new imperialism menacing Ukraine. "This iron lady keeps the embryo of the new empire beneath her feet," Shakti Noyon elaborates. "Empire—it is *greatness*. People want to *feel* the greatness. Empire—it is *fear*. People want to feel the fear" (108).

And so, inside this "iron idol" (109), Jhokhar at last confronts the Russians, whose government eradicated his homeland. Unexpectedly, the resurrected Lama Noyon offers the Chechen the ultimate gift of *sulde*, to make his enemies suffer and to conquer the world:

Sulde is the ravenous hunger for power! It doesn't care who possesses it! The important thing is to find the vessel that will carry it into this world! ...Take *sulde* inside of you ... for vengeance. You will burn down their cities. You will destroy their countries. Millions will follow you. Don't you want this? (120, my ellipsis).

In ultimately renouncing the temptation of worldly dominion, Jhokhar pays with his life—which to him only means he can finally enter his beloved "heavenly Chechnya." In any case, he breaks the cycle of imperialist conquest, bringing the Russians' plots to naught. In his firefight against Ukrainian special forces—still inside the Motherland Monument—the Russian ultra-nationalist Ilya Serbin can only sputter helplessly as he blasts away: "*Pathetic little nation!* Can you even comprehend what *empire* means?" (135). Fittingly, Serbin's end comes in battle with the Ukrainian Colonel Buzun, a telepathic mutant from Chernobyl, conspiracy theorist and anti-Semite ("Did you know that the Masons are in bed with the Elders of Zion?" [103]). Serbin blows himself up, taking Buzun with him, in the shadow of the Motherland Monument; the plans of Ukraine's enemies—i.e., extremists, both foreign and domestic—go up in smoke (142).

This denouement offers a possible solution to the eternal problem of Ukraine's iffy survival: only through a Buddhist repudiation of desire will suffering cease. Like

Four Winds, Jhokhar transcends selfishness and saves the world ... but for how long? In all of Baranko's mature work, just beyond the high-concept plots and spine-tingling futures, lurks the shadow of imperialism—centuries of it—and the unending struggle to escape its grasp.

### **Conclusion: “Ukraine’s Glory Has Not Yet Died”**

“To articulate the past historically ... means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” - Benjamin (255).

Even in its national anthem Ukraine is in peril. Its current version<sup>40</sup> reads in part:

*Ukraine’s glory has not yet died, nor her freedom,  
Upon us, compatriots, fate shall smile once more.  
Our enemies will vanish, like dew in the morning sun,  
And we too shall rule, brothers, in a free land of our own.*

...

*Souls and bodies we’ll lay down, all for our freedom,  
And we will show that we, brothers, are of the Cossack nation!*

To be Ukrainian, these lyrics tell us, is to live in perpetual danger of non-existence; someone is always annexing your territory, fomenting separatists on your periphery, outright invading you and making you subject to their will. Like Colonel Buzun, a Ukrainian carries history on their body and soul: metaphorically scarred, traumatized by generations of plunderers. Only the utmost vigilance and strength will prevent the next onslaught of marauding hordes.

We should read the ongoing war in the county’s East (centered in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions) in this context of national border insecurity. Though the reasons for the conflict defy easy explanation<sup>41</sup>—I would never suggest Russian neo-imperialism as the only factor—stakeholders on both sides tend to resort to just such simplifications. Baranko, for example, opines:

I would call the war today a mistake. They’ve filled people’s heads with some crap or other, they’re fighting and they themselves don’t know what for. For some sort of mystical “Russian world.” It’s a war of phantoms. The people of Donbass are fighting for and against something that doesn’t exist. They all have different goals, but in their heads, it’s all the same: the Soviet mentality (*sovok*). They want to revive it, but that’s impossible. The *sovok* has already died out (Gavrishova).

Comics too have been conscripted in this fight—literally; works devoted to the eastern war include the graphic novel *Zvytiaga: Savur Mohyla* [Victory: Savur Mohyla, 2015] by Denis Fadeev and several artists, about a 2014 battle around a strategic point near the Russian border; *Kiborgi: Istoriia trekh* [Cyborgs: Story of the Three, 2016] by Dmytro Tkachenko, on the battle for the Donetsk airport; and *Okhorontsi kraïny* [Guardians of the Country, 2017], a series co-conceived by writer Leonid Krasnopol'sky, himself displaced from the Donbass region due to the war, with script and art by Asta Legios (“Ukrainians Defend”). The latter was presented by the Ukrainian Ministry of Information Policy in a press conference, at which Deputy Minister Emine Dzhaparova noted, “All in all, it is about our modern history, where we have our heroes, more natural to our worldview, instead of Soviet ‘Little Octobrists’, ‘pioneers’ and ‘Russian bogatyrs’” (“Ukrainian Comics About Crimea Liberation”).<sup>42</sup>

Such works and statements dovetail with Pivtorak’s notion of modern Ukrainian comics as an unavoidably postcolonial practice. In these times of crisis and renewed alarm over perceived neo-imperialist threats, a long-standing—and justified—sense of national precarity becomes especially plain for all to see, even in comics. What Baranko often addresses allegorically, through magical realist fantasies and baroque alternate histories, grows all too explicit: “Ukrainian choice is a choice between nonexistence and an existence that kills you.” The situation recalls the rather Orwellian reply of a Ukrainian scholar when asked whether his country has a history. “[I]f Ukraine has a future,” he answered, “then Ukraine will have a history” (von Hagen 658).

## Notes

- 1 The City of Moscow Department of Culture sponsored the open-air exhibit, which ran from June 22 to July 17, 2017. Except where noted, all translations my own.
- 2 The bridge cost more than three billion dollars, its construction contract handled by a childhood friend and judo sparring partner of Putin’s, Arkady Rotenberg (known as “the king of state orders” for his facility at drawing government contracts, often with no competing bid) (Yaffa). It opened to vehicular traffic in May, 2018, to much fanfare.
- 3 Crimea had belonged to the Russian Empire since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1954 it transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which collapsed in 1991 along with the rest of the Soviet Union (Plokhyy). In March, 2014, with the separatist conflict underway in Eastern Ukraine, a stage-managed referendum showed overwhelming support among Crimeans for joining Russia. The Obama administration immediately imposed economic sanctions on Russia for its encroachment on Ukraine’s sovereignty and the annexation. As for the bridge, Mikhail Blinkin, Director of the Transportation Institute at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, noted a better-developed ferry system would achieve much the same results, at least in terms of

- passenger traffic (Yaffa). This had to do with politics, not economics.
- 4 My wording here risks oversimplifying matters. Pro-Western European vs. pro-Putin positions in Ukraine do not divide up neatly between Ukrainian and Russian speakers, respectively. See Chernetsky 2019.
  - 5 Zenkovsky: 65-71. On the necessity of resisting Russophile historiography, see Wilson: 183.
  - 6 He adds: “The multi-ethnic chaos of the region, itself one of the direct consequences of imperial policies over the centuries, typically was offered as a justification for further imperial hegemony. Moreover, both Russian/Soviet and German ideologists and political leaders traditionally maintained that even intra-regional cooperation in east central and eastern Europe was not viable without German or Russian hegemony” (660).
  - 7 As George Grabowicz further noted: “Provincialization in terms of the loss of quality, narrowing of horizons, distortion of intellectual and artistic production, and so on was accompanied by the more classical features of colonial rule, especially economic exploitation and the reshaping of all indigenous cultural institutions ... In effect, while turning it into a province and thus purportedly a constituent part of a larger administrative whole, the imperial goal was to weaken it, to prevent its resurgence by purposefully stunting its growth and infrastructure ... Overarching it all was the general discreditation or, as the Soviet term had it, “deperspectivization” of things Ukrainian—in the scholarly sphere, as well as in every other” (quoted in Chernetsky: 47).
  - 8 Named after the central public square in Kyiv.
  - 9 Crimea is not the only territory Russia is annexing. For a report on the country’s ongoing “border creep,” see Smith.
  - 10 See Alaniz 2010, Chapter 2. Kasanědi names Anatolyi Vasilenko, who published the children’s book *The Adventures of Blackpaws the Cat* in 1983, the “patriarch” of modern Ukrainian comics (61).
  - 11 See also Buryanik for a useful summation of Ukrainian comics in the 1990s.
  - 12 Featured for years on the homepage of the Russian *Komiksolet* website.
  - 13 *K-9* co-founder Alexei Olin struggled to differentiate Ukrainian from Russian comics in 2005. As he told me: “To be honest, we don’t have many differences. Now we see a tendency to make short pieces, large works don’t get published. They don’t exist. ... The mentality is very much the same as in Russia. ... I think for at least the next five years, comics [in Ukraine] will keep getting published primarily in Russian.” When I asked what effect the Orange Revolution had had on comics there, he replied, “Nothing has changed.” If anything, censorship had worsened under President Yushchenko; *K-9* was now having trouble putting a nude woman on its cover (Olin).
  - 14 See also Tufts, on the controversial Kyiv-born, WWII-era émigré artist Vincent Krassousky.



- 15 The word is formed from the Chinese *dao* (“way” or “path”) and *haopak*, a traditional Ukrainian dance which some believe closely related to a domestic martial art (see Pivtorak’s comments on “Combat Haopak” [6]).
- 16 Legendary horsemen and warriors, the Cossacks are an ethnic group of the southern Russian/Ukrainian steppes, who fought both for and against the Czars for centuries. From 1649 to 1764 the Cossack Hetmanate formed an independent quasi-democratic state within the borders of modern Ukraine (see Wilson).
- 17 As Baranko rather caustically put it to me: “The olden times ... more specifically, the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries—this is a theme which Ukraine will never get away from. It’s, as they say, our everything. Just like, incidentally, Westerns in the USA. From time to time, the nation starts to get sick of this theme, but within five years or so they start to miss it again and it bursts out anew. Samurai in Japan, cowboys in America, musketeers in France—this is forever. And, well, in Ukraine it’s Cossacks. And I like this quite a bit, of course, except those cases when they use it for some sort of nationalist themes. By the way, in the last 100 years in Ukraine this was used precisely as a dumb imprint: some moustachioed dude (dyadka), dancing the *haopak* in baggy trousers—everybody gets sick and tired of it” (Baranko 2017).
- 18 Some see a resemblance between Skorovoda and the beloved Olympic boxer Oleksandr Usyk (Rafalsky).
- 19 In contrast, foreign graphic narrative about Ukraine tends to highlight tragedy, national disaster and stereotype, as seen in Chantal Montelier’s *Tchernobyl Mon Amour* (2006); Igor’s *Quaderni Ucraini* (2010); Francisco Sánchez and Natacha Bustos’ *Tchernobyl La Zone* (2011); Emanuel Lepage’s *Un Printemps à Tchernobyl* (2012); Aurelien Ducoudray and Christophe Alliel’s *Les Chiens de Pripyat* series (2017). See Gosling for a less maudlin outsider’s view of modern Ukraine, from Sarah Lippert.
- 20 Though as Christophe Dony understates, “Characterizing comics as postcolonial simply because they are produced, published, and distributed in actual postcolonial spaces seems to be problematic” (12). See his essay for his elaboration, a challenge for comics studies to truly grapple with postcolonialism.
- 21 Pavlo Skoropadskyi (1873-1945) briefly led a revived Hetmanate after toppling the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1918.
- 22 At about age seven Baranko discovered the French newspaper *L’Humanite*, which featured comics on the last page (Gavrishova). He received the greatest inspiration from Hugo Pratt. After serving in the Army, he went on a mystic journey to Siberia and won the US immigration lottery in 1999. He emigrated to the states, but returned a few years later. Baranko’s early works include the 1993-1998 *Mamay* series, about a Cossack adventurer.
- 23 For example, *Maxym Osa* (Evgenios, 2008), deals with a rapscallion 17<sup>th</sup>-century Cossack anti-hero detective and goes beyond a mere “glorification of Cos-

- sackhood” (Pivtorak: 3). As Baranko told an interviewer: “No two patriotisms are alike. For example, *Maxim Osa* is not at all a patriotic comics work, like many people think. It’s an adventure story on Ukrainian themes. Overall I can’t stand any sort of patriotic literature, comics, films. I just like good stuff.” (Gavrishova).
- 24 Baranko shares an interest in Native American culture not uncommon among Eastern Europeans. It dates to the immense European popularity of Karl May’s 19<sup>th</sup> century novels, which spawned the “noble savage” portrait of Native Americans in various media, including the “osterns,” “ghoulash westerns” and “borscht westerns” produced in the USSR, various Soviet bloc countries and Yugoslavia. See Šavelková.
- 25 The repetition with a difference recalls Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski’s 1987 film *Blind Chance*, in which we witness the different lives that result from the main character catching or not catching a train (a scene repeated over and over).
- 26 He singled out *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* by Black Elk and John G. Neihardt (1932) (Anderson-Elysee).
- 27 A Ukrainian version of Magical Realism has existed at least since the Romantic era, especially in the work of Myhola Hohol (more widely known by the Russian version of his name, Nikolai Gogol).
- 28 All emphases and ellipses in comics works in the original unless otherwise indicated.
- 29 The author himself falls under the gravitational pull of “what really happened.” As Baranko explained in an interview: “Some logic traps of the time were really the pain in the ass. For example, if we had no Europeans in America, that meant no horses in America. With no horses, although a stereotype, there’s no strong image of American Indian Plain Rider. But the Empire of Aztecs and the lost and last Conquistador helped me with that” (Anderson-Elysee).
- 30 For further discussion of the racialized pitfalls of the alternate history, see Alaniz 2019.
- 31 Baranko told me: “For this project I wrenched out of my head the craziest stuff that had stuck and made an impression on me in the foregoing 15 years while at large in the former USSR and made a kind of cocktail out of it” (2017). He also cited Mikhail Bulgakov and Russian postmodernist Viktor Pelevin as influences.
- 32 The novel’s visual-verbal excess recalls Chernetsky’s linkage of magical realism with the Baroque, and his description of Ukraine as “the most Baroque-oriented” of the Slavic nations (188).
- 33 *Apelsin* means “orange” in both Ukrainian and Russian, perhaps in an echo of Anthony Burgess, whereas the failed sci-fi writer as dictator himself recalls L. Ron Hubbard.
- 34 Apelsinov’s belief that Russians descend from the Golden Horde reflects Eurasianism, a very real strain in post-Soviet Russian politics, which rejects Western rationalism and culture. In their place it puts a mystical hodgepodge of Slavic/neo-pagan origin myths and apocalypticism, reorienting the country culturally

- and ideologically to the East. Originated in its modern form by historian Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), today political scientists like Aleksander Dugin, a close advisor to President Putin, have made it a central plank in Russia's domestic and foreign policy. See Gumilev's *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere of Earth* (1978).
- 35 Apelsinov has revived the Soviet-era People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, forerunner of the KGB.
- 36 While a common Chechen man's name, Jhokar evokes associations with the Batman villain Joker, particular given the diabolical toothy grin Baranko's hero occasionally sports.
- 37 Among the most precarious of populations, the North Caucasian Chechens proved stubbornly resistant to imperial Russian incursions into their region, which date back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. They even defied Stalin, who punished them severely, deporting whole populations. In the post-Soviet era, Chechnya had openly defied Russian centralized control, which led to two wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2000). See Ram. The "nuclear option" for Chechnya is not so far-fetched, as some military leaders recommended just that in the 1990s.
- 38 Baranko called the "tendency to isolation from the world and the idea of The Border between worlds" "an old stereotype lodged deep in Ukrainian brains" (2017).
- 39 A common opinion among Russian chauvinists and ultra-nationalists.
- 40 Music adopted in 1992, lyrics in 2003, revised from the original 1862 lyrics by Pavlo Chubynsky, which stated, more darkly, "Ukraine has not yet died ..." Compare this with the first line of the Polish national anthem, its lyrics written by Józef Wybicki in 1797: "Poland has not yet perished ..."
- 41 See De Ploeg, Chapter 13, for a sense of the danger in such dehumanizing oversimplifications, and Yekelchyk.
- 42 One cannot avoid mixing politics and art in this era. Sergei Zakharov, dubbed "the Donetsk Banksy," was held captive for six weeks by Donetsk People's Republic forces for his unflattering caricature of DPR leaders (Lokot). In the current hyper-nationalist climate, even works unrelated to the war, such as Oleksandr Koreshkov's series *Among Sheep* (2017), about a wolf hiding in a population of sheep, take on paranoid colorings. For one of the Ukraine-Russia crisis' more ridiculous developments, the anime fan art inspired by Crimea's new Prosecutor General Natalya Poklonskaya, see Ashcraft.

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Mihaela Precup

## **The Autobiographical Mode in Post-Communist Romanian Comics: Everyday Life in Brynjar Åbel Bandlien's *Strîmb Living* and Andreea Chirică's *The Year of the Pioneer***

In the contemporary Romanian comics scene, an environment where publishers have only recently begun to selectively understand comics as something other than an exclusively humorous or child-oriented medium, the attempt to obtain funding for book-length comics works can often lead to an unpredictable scramble for publication grants offered by embassies, as well as various foreign and local institutions and organizations.<sup>1</sup> This chapter begins with a brief introduction to Romanian comics in general before turning the focus to the representation of everyday life in Romania before and after the communist regime collapsed in December 1989. I examine two autobiographical comics for adults issued by Hardcomics Publishers: Brynjar Åbel Bandlien's *Strîmb Life* (2009) and Andreea Chirică's *The Year of the Pioneer* (2011), both book-length graphic narratives largely preoccupied with the representation of everyday life in Romania.<sup>2</sup> Bandlien's memoir, the first and so far only queer comic published in Romania, examines post-communist everyday life through the eyes of a gay man (a foreigner with a tenuous grasp of Romanian). Bandlien, a Norwegian dancer and choreographer, moves to Romania for love, and finds he needs to negotiate his way through customs and mentalities he has trouble understanding. On the other hand, Chirică's book examines everyday life during the communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu, more specifically the year 1986, when the author was seven years old. Her book, an inventory of personal anecdotes, recounts the multiple frustrations and absurdities of life under the communist regime from a child's perspective. Although they ostensibly appear quite different, Chirică's book has a lot



in common with Bandlien's, given that they both focalize the experience of vulnerable witnesses to a reality they can do little to control. Curious, often sympathetic, and similarly baffled, the positions of child and adult occupy a precarious space both inside and outside the social dynamic that surrounds both authors.

### **From Realism to Experimentation: The Romanian Comic Book Scene before and after 1989**

**M**ainstream Romanian culture and the academic community both persist in regarding the medium of comics as infantile, possibly because it began its association with adult-oriented content only sometime after the December 1989 fall of the communist regime.<sup>3</sup> Before that, the industry primarily targeted children; comics' educational potential was fully mined particularly during the Ceaușescu dictatorship. This becomes evident even upon a casual look at the only history of Romanian comics published so far, an impressive volume written by Dodo Niță and Alexandru Ciubotariu, which covers the period from 1891, when the first comics (reproductions of German and Austrian strips) were published in a children's magazine, up to 2010. While perhaps simplistic, the authors' periodization illustrates the perceived centrality of the socialist/communist age: "the Golden Age" (1891-1947), "Socialism and Comics" (1948-1989), and "Contemporary Romanian Comics" (1990-2010). Reprints from German, Austrian, and French comics initially dominated the "Golden Age"; only during the inter-war period did professional Romanian cartoonists begin publishing more consistently.<sup>4</sup> They produced humorous strips for children covering a variety of subjects, some of which can also be read as social satire (the *Haplea* series, for instance),<sup>5</sup> often with text in the shape of short poems. In 1947, the "Golden Age" of both cartooning and other forms of artistic expression ended when the nationalization of publishing houses and print shops dealt a death-blow to the freedom of the press.

Comics published during the two post-war Romanian dictatorships were subject to censorship and used for providing an appropriate ideological education to Romanian children.<sup>6</sup> Historical and travel comics—the two main genres encouraged by the state—were a constant presence in children's magazines, whose main aesthetic mode derived from the brand of socialist realism demanded by the communist regime's aesthetic preferences.<sup>7</sup> For example, historical comics published after July 1971, when Ceaușescu publicly announced a return to socialist realism, displayed great attention to period detail, avoided caricature (even when enemies of the Romanian people were represented), and introduced life-like characters in awkward heroic poses.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it seems possible that some of these authors were influenced by the cartooning styles of the popular *Pif* magazine, which published such works as *Teddy Ted*, *Davy*

*Crockett*, *Loup Noir*, *Fanfan la toulipe*, *Robin des Bois*, *Dr. Justice*, *Rahan*, or *Corto Maltese* (Ionescu). Romanian readers rarely had access to English-speaking comics, but could read *Pif*, due to its funding by the French Communist Party. After the fall of communism in December 1989, the scattered efforts to publish and sell comics in a country where the majority of the population struggled under financial instability proved somewhat fruitful, as I shall demonstrate briefly below, but the Romanian comics scene managed neither to generate the respect that the medium enjoys in other cultural spaces nor to produce a vibrant comic book culture. Instead, the market remained chaotic, fraught with arguments between generations of fans. Most importantly, there persist major distribution problems preventing creators and publishers from producing work consistently, both because there are no comic book stores in the entire country (not counting online stores or dedicated sections in a handful of bookstores) and distributors tend to delay payment to publishers, which can often amount to a death sentence for comics magazines.<sup>9</sup> It does not help that the comics readership—as one can easily see from bitter online feuds on facebook groups and blogs—has fractured into fans of the realism established during the communist period and younger audiences whose tastes were shaped by American and European independent and superhero comics and who have a broader, less conservative view of what the medium of comics can do.<sup>10</sup>

Compared to neighboring Serbia, with its much higher volume of comics publications, the Romanian comic book scene appears to be “growing,” if one takes a more optimistic view of the current situation, or “stalling,” if one chooses to focus rather on the very small number of publications, translations, public events, and outlets that distribute comics. According to Ciubotariu and Niță, after December 1989, quite a few publishers made attempts to establish a long-running comics magazine.<sup>11</sup> Between 1990 and 2010, twenty-four short-lived magazines for children and young adults (some of them exclusively comics) appeared, publishing a variety of genres, including detective comics, travel comics, SciFi, and historical comics. *Pif* was also revived, translated into Romanian, its characters (beloved by generations who saw it as a window to the West) drawn by Romanian artists. Apart from important characters like *Pif* and *Hercule*, Adevarul Holding revived another popular French communist superhero, *Rahan* (whom audiences knew from *Pif*), translated into Romanian in 2010. From 1989 to 2010, only some fifteen book-length comics appeared, partly due to the fact that publishers started becoming interested in translating global canonical graphic narratives. The first such translation, *Persepolis* by French-Iranian artist Marjane Satrapi, was published in 2010 by Art Publishers, which remains the only mainstream press that consistently dedicates resources to the publication of translations of foreign adult-oriented comics. They followed *Persepolis* with Satrapi’s *Embroideries* (2011), Edmond Baudoin’s *Travesti* (Humanitas Publishers, 2011), Lorenzo Mattotti and Claudio Piersanti’s *Stigmata* (Art Publishers, 2011), and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (Art Publishers, 2012).<sup>12</sup>

In both the mainstream and the independent sector, post-1989 Romanian comics have embraced a variety of topics: Romanian fairy tale adaptations, war comics, social comics, educational comics, and non-fiction comics. In an attempt to reach wider audiences—and since the vast majority of comics enthusiasts in Romania speak English—some of these books (particularly in the “alternative” sphere) are published in English. However, distribution remains problematic and print runs small, since publishers still feel an often justified anxiety about managing to sell such material.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most promising—and, for a while, the most successful—post-1989 comic book venture was the bimonthly journal *HAC*, short for *Harap Alb continuă* [The White Arab Continues] which published 38 issues from September 2012 to December 2017. Initially a loose adaptation of a canonical Romanian fairy tale, “Povestea lui Harap-Alb” [The Story of the White Arab], written by 19<sup>th</sup>-century author Ion Creangă, *HAC* stood out as the first enduring post-communist Romanian superhero comic, and although its narrative core focused on the story of Harap Alb (a questing prince enslaved by a villain), it expanded in time to include work on related topics by creators who did not specifically address the *Harap Alb* storyworld. The main story’s aesthetics borrowed from the canon of American superhero comics, sometimes with mixed results and not enough concern for avoiding sexism or oversimplified racial and ethnic categorization and characterization. With a print run of 1,000 copies, the first issues targeted children and teenagers, but later started incorporating more adult content; the magazine grew unsuitable for children under 16. Its recent disappearance exemplifies the current instability of the Romanian comic book market.

The absence of specialized comic book stores and small number of events dedicated to the medium testify to the fact that the Romanian comic book scene, despite a long history and a large number of talented artists, remains underdeveloped. The largest comic book convention in Romania takes place in Bucharest, with smaller such events in Craiova or Constanța (considerably smaller cities). The first meeting of the East European Comic Con took place in Bucharest in March, 2013 and had approximately 9,400 visitors; the fourth convention took place in May, 2016 and boasted much larger attendance (approximately 38,000).<sup>14</sup> The event mostly focuses on American comics, action figures, animation, T-shirts, films, and gaming; unfortunately, the con does not particularly encourage Romanian artists to participate, or even give them the best exposure during the event, hence their section has been dwindling as artists cannot afford to pay for the table and the audience does not adequately support them.<sup>15</sup>

In this unstable environment, Miloš Jovanović, a Serbian designer and expatriate living in Bucharest, made an important contribution to the comics scene when he founded Hardcomics, the only Romanian publishing house to focus exclusively on comics, mostly as anthologies. From 2000 to 2017, they released fifteen volumes, of which seven were collections on various topics. A quick look at the creator bios published

in one of these anthologies, *The Book of George* (2011), shows that they identified as painters, “artists” (a general term), graphic designers, illustrators, and animators, but not cartoonists. Jovanović, a designer who produces books considered high-quality as far as production value is concerned, has a stubbornly uneven record as an editor; in addition, he often provokes outrage among the older generation of comic book fans for making various disparaging comments about the state of comics in Romania. All the same, he has played a relatively consistent and key role in building an “alternative” Romanian comics scene.

Hardcomics contributed to the consolidation of the underground scene, even though Jovanović did controversially claim that Romania does not either have or want any comics tradition at all (Ciubotariu and Niță 228). Jovanović’s decision to encourage non-professional cartoonists—published in an English nobody bothered to correct, probably because that would have looked too much like stuffy “professionalism”—has produced predictably mixed results, but the comics provide a good opportunity to observe different authors’ understanding of the medium’s storytelling capacities. At the same time, Hardcomics has produced very uneven books, and seems to have a somewhat incoherent view of the part sequential storytelling plays in the process of graphic narration, as Ciubotariu and Niță also note (230). Thus, some of the comics look uncannily as if they might have belonged in the American underground from the late 60s-early 70s, when artists often prioritized the pleasure of a wild “rumpus” over producing a story whose narrative thread one could follow (see Rosenkrantz; Skinn). With small print runs (between 300-500 copies, most of which sold out), at reasonable prices even by Romanian standards (about ten dollars/book, some of which are hardback editions), Hardcomics has concentrated on autobiographical works.

This chapter provides close readings of two such works. Like much of this publisher’s output, they present an opportunity to study the emergence of an “underground” comics environment many decades after American underground comix, showing how artists conceptualize and construct works of memory outside of a highly-practiced or heavily-theorized framework. At the same time, these Hardcomics productions demonstrate how their authors’ untutored style sometimes hampers, sometimes helps tell stories in graphic narrative, and how they reinterpret visual-verbal stereotypes associated with (post-) communist Romania through comics.

### **Queering Everyday Life in Romania: Brjnyar Bandlien’s *Strîmb Life* (2009)<sup>16</sup>**

**B**andlien’s first comic book, *Strîmb Life*, employs various strategies to convey a sense of the mundanely extraordinary that is his everyday life in Bucharest and elsewhere with his partner, choreographer Manuel Pelmuș. In Romanian, *strîmb*

means “bent.” Though definitely not a familiar term for “queer,” that may be owed mostly to the fact that there exists no generally-used, non-offensive term for “queer” in Romanian. The first queer (or *strîmb*) comic book published in Romania is square-ish, slim, black-and-white, and has a peephole carved in the front cover (Fig. 1). The book looks strangely unassuming for such an achievement.

Through that important peephole in the cover of *Strîmb Life*, Bandlien invites the reader to become a voyeur in possession of a rare view: the everyday life of a gay couple (a fairly absent image in contemporary Romania). Divided thematically into chapters, the book contains one-page stories with the same panel structure: eight conventional panels plus a round one in the middle, reproducing the peephole on the cover. Two of the panels on each page inevitably show the two male protagonists asleep, in the morning and at night, perhaps to indicate the same soothing routine in which this couple contentedly basks day after day.

The couple displays a quiet satisfaction with the little repetitions of life, also expressed by their unchanging body postures. Brynjar, the blond character, always appears casually lying back, hands behind his head, while Manuel, dark-haired with a goatee, is always cross-legged, his Mac on his lap. Irrespective of the activity they engage in, their life remains permanently tethered to the central panel, going round it at a steady pace, grounded by the harmony of the “home *strîmb* home” which the two men have managed to build. In this way, the seeming “peephole” suggested by the book cover gradually turns out to be less a gateway to the arcana of homosexuality and more a formal device meant to suggest the separation of the happy couple from the outside world, whose intrusions they do not always welcome. The “outside” of Bucharest, however, serves most of the time as an extension of the couple’s indoor



Fig. 1. Two-page cover of *Strîmb Life*, showing Brynjar and Manuel through a peephole.

life, especially when they go to places (such as the Contemporary National Dance Center, The French Institute, The Goethe Institute, the underground club Ota, and the Contemporary National Art Museum) populated by friends and likeminded people. The back of the book provides an inventory of some of the people they meet outside their home: “neopunks, street dogs, florarese, fashion victims, street kids, transvestites, vampires, piscotarii and ponies.”<sup>17</sup>

The everyday activities of this *strîmb* couple inside the home reflect those of any couple: chatting about the events of the day, looking out the window to observe the latest in Bucharest fashion, taking out the trash, having sex. The peephole closes when it comes to their carefully listed sexual positions; darkness and a sheet cover the couple’s activities, the labels handwritten in the bookcase above the bed and the wavy line of the bedclothes the only clues for the reader’s imagination. Conflict rarely punctures the narrative of this enviable cohabitation, and whenever it happens, the source of dissension never emerges from within the couple’s private sphere; rather, it is the outside world manifesting itself, say, as the stray dogs of Bucharest or the fictional drama of “GeorgeMichaelJackson,” a street kid the couple casually decide to “adopt” after pregnancy predictably fails to follow sex. However, very little disturbs the harmony of this couple, who joyfully accept and peacefully enact their routine irrespective of geographical location.

Nonetheless, the book manifests a disconnectedness from the everyday realities of Romania outside the standard fare of aggressive stray dogs and orphans. Nowhere else is this more visible than in the “adoption” episode, which reads as unnecessarily flimsy and seems to avoid the real social issue behind the caricature. In this clearly fictitious episode—one of the several flights of fancy in the book—a homeless child materializes in the couple’s home; when he suddenly disappears, they roam the streets looking for him; when they find him, they decide to ask him to wash himself in one of Piața Unirii’s public fountains in central Bucharest. The twist at the end of this episode is the discovery that the child is a girl, whom they decide to call Mihaela. The episode comes off as confusing, particularly because the couple is next depicted doing social work in an underprivileged community from the Bucharest neighborhood of Rahova, where they think they recognize the homeless child they were going to adopt. While it is commendable that the couple organizes dance workshops with children in need, they display more interest in how well the children dance than whether they have correctly identified the adopted child from their fantasy. In fact, the entire GeorgeMichaelJackson/Mihaela episode seems to exist simply as a humorous and whimsical diversion. Perhaps this episode also indicates a certain difficulty in separating the life of a romantic couple so completely from the life of the city; this hesitation speaks quite keenly to the negotiation with the outside world many couples must perform.<sup>18</sup>

*Strîmb Life* aptly shows that love is indeed the belief in repetition. As queer theorist Peggy Phelan states in *Mourning Sex*, where she too combines autobiography, biography, and fiction: “love is, among other things, the belief in repetition—that the beloved will return, that you each will come again” (150). Such a combination of genres works well in *Strîmb Life*; as the Brynjar character says to his partner (and as we witness through the peephole) on the last page, “I never get bored with you.” Bandlien’s *strîmb* work thus confirms the notorious “resistance to definition” (Jagose 1) of queerness, but also engages in deliberate but playful conversation with the methods of an important comics genre, “reality-based comics” (i.e. “autobiographical comics,” “graphic memoir,” “autographics”<sup>19</sup>). In the end, Bandlien willingly situates his work on the side of what Lynda Barry famously called “autobifictionalography,” to signal the generic ambiguity of narratives such as her own and Bandlien’s, where lived experience combines with fictitious episodes, either on purpose or because of the inevitable unreliability of memory. As shown above, Bandlien uses fantasy to flesh out the missing pieces of an extravagant world of love and happiness. I am referring here not only to *Strîmb Life*, but also to his next book, *Strîmb Living* (2011), where Manuel and Brynjar are shown leading the same blissfully mundane lives thirty minutes from Oslo, together with Oskar, Brynjar’s benevolent uncle, in a snug house tucked away in a forest and circled by flying men that function like the protective peephole from the first book. *Strîmb Living* is one step closer to utopia than *Strîmb Life*, perhaps because the intrusions of the everyday appear less here, and the harmonious and often dreamlike universe of love and leisure populated by the three main characters tends to encompass the rest of the world rather than allowing the world to come in and spoil its bliss. The characters calmly accept the intrusion of fiction upon reality, as when Brynjar and Manuel hitch a ride on a moose’s back on one of the rare occasions when they have to leave the house to attend a party.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Bandlien’s decision to place his characters outside of (hetero)normative time manages to sketch the key outlines of a fantasy space where *queer/strîmb* is a temporarily achieved utopia, but also to express hope for the future as seen through the joyful routine of a couple that escapes “the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam 6). In this sense, it matters that the author places so little emphasis on the two main characters’ jobs (they are well-known and very active artists), because in this manner Bandlien manages to lift his narrative even further out of “grown-up” temporality, responsibility, and fear. There is—importantly—no fear in Bandlien’s work, and it is in this safe place where repetition is embraced as a confirmation of the beloved’s presence that we find the blueprints for the Not-Yet-Here of *strîmbness*.<sup>21</sup>

**A Communist Time Capsule: Andreea Chirică's *The Year of the Pioneer* (2011)**

Everyday life during communism remains little examined in Romania, less so than in other former communist bloc countries, in large part because the post-1989 political situation hindered all efforts to create a consistent politics of memory.<sup>22</sup> In this context, Andreea Chirică's autobiographical record of the year 1986, when she was seven years old, marks an important contribution to a memory gap often cursorily deplored in the Romanian media. In a country that has not yet reached the level of *Ostalgie* present in Germany, people of Chirică's generation (i.e. born in the late '70s-early '80s) and older, construct inventories of objects and practices on Facebook pages dedicated to the subject,<sup>23</sup> but the memory of communism does not have a specific museum and filmmakers who focus on the subject often complain they find foreign audiences more receptive than Romanian ones.<sup>24</sup>

I find Chirică's *The Year of the Pioneer* difficult to place generically because it is not a conventional memoir with a coherent narrative; rather, it reads like something between a time capsule and a diary. The book's main narrative conceit is that it appears to have been made by a child: the drawings are clumsy and naïve, the English broken,<sup>25</sup> and the handwritten text in the cursive lettering children still learn at school. In this case, the handwriting does not merely reflect "the subjective positionality of the author" (Chute 11), but, for viewers conversant with the tradition of national penmanship, this child's handwriting, with its age-specific quirks and playful flourishes, compensates for what communist children did not have access to: colorful crayons, pens, stickers, and other customary adornments of children's notebooks. The handwriting thus connects the author to an entire generation of children who grew up during the last decade of Ceaușescu's dictatorship, and subtly encodes not only the mark of the author's hand, as Chute notes in *Graphic Women*, but also the trace of totalitarianism and its traumas. References to the political education given to children at school suggest the pervasiveness of official ideology, which permeated the smallest of everyday routines. For instance, in one of the several whimsically decorated lists included in the book, more specifically a list of things that she "knows," the narrator places her awareness of the fact that "in imperialist-capitalist countries children work in factories and sleep on the street" (n. p.).

Although the book is comprised of individual stories usually confined to one page, but also occasionally occupy two-page spreads, it does not read as static as Bandlien's. Chirică's snapshots of everyday life are full of movement: characters rush around, have animated conversations, exchange rumours and hopes. Despite the minimal use of sequentiality, the figures appear constantly involved in extremely important activities that would be superfluous outside of the absurdity of the totalitarian



regime. She reports that bananas, for instance, are always green when you buy them, but you can only do so in winter, and then you have to look at them for days until they have ripened. Communism leaves little room for leisure, as people hone their ingenuity in the forced scramble for everyday luxuries such as food, shoes, or clothes. Opportunities such as taking a bath on the one day a week with hot water form a central part of the narrative, while sadness in the wake of personal tragedy also quickly gives way to the same frantic search for essentials. This kind of brutal interference of the regime into its citizens' everyday chronology has been analyzed by Katherine Verdery, who borrowed the term "etatizare" from Romanian-American writer Norman Manea in her coinage of the phrase "the etatization of time in Romania" (40).<sup>26</sup> By defining this process as "the ways in which the Romanian state seized time from the purposes many Romanians wanted to pursue" (40), Verdery accurately identifies a large mechanism of control whose manifestations in everyday life Chirică recalls in her work.

*The Year of the Pioneer* presents an important inventory of everyday gestures, vocabulary, and mentalities; however, Chirică employs graphic narration in a manner that only fully unveils the significance of this inventory—mainly through visual clues—to people already familiar with it. In other words, for anyone who did not witness the year 1986 in Romania, the visual and verbal registers do not complement each other in



**Fig. 2.** The narrator from Andreea Chirică's *The Year of the Pioneer* buys sunflower seeds from a street vendor.

a seamless vocabulary whose dynamic successfully yields an easily decodable meaning. Chirică's often unexplicated drawings thus construct a closed space of recollection only accessible to witnesses of the same historical moment. For some of the members of this target-audience, the fact that the book is in English may act as a deterrent (because not all of them speak English, they may not buy it), but the visual representation of familiar scenes would ensure more than sufficient comprehension.<sup>27</sup> In a sense, Chirică thus contributes to what Svetlana Boym calls "ironic nostalgia," which she distinguishes from "utopian nostalgia" and defines as a manner of longing for a past place without desiring its return (284). From this perspective, *The Year of the Pioneer*, with its many gaps, under-explained references, and in-jokes, performs a reconstruction of 1986 in communist Romania as a space both recognizable and mysterious, combining "estrangement with the longing for the familiar" (Boym 290). This makes Chirică's book important not only due to its ambivalence, but also because it demonstrates the necessity of producing a record of everyday life during an oppressive regime.

Despite Chirică's use of English, the bulk of the more obscure references will remain mysterious for non-Romanians of a certain age, even if the author does attempt to briefly elucidate certain objects, both in the body of the book and in a glossary. For instance, in one panel (Fig. 2), the narrator, dressed in her school uniform, walks towards a Roma woman sitting cross-legged on the pavement. It may not seem immediately obvious to a foreign reader that the woman is Roma, even though to a Romanian person of any generation, the woman's ethnicity is marked not only by her clothes and accessories (large looped earrings, hair covered by a kerchief, a large beaded necklace around her neck, and a wide flowery skirt), but also by her occupation: she is selling sunflower seeds and candied apples, something traditionally done by Roma women since before the communist regime. The caption, inscribed on the wall of the school building behind the woman, indicates what she is selling and what Andreea is buying. Another element not explained by the text, which probably remains obscure to anyone who did not experience this historical period, is the little girl's posture as she is waiting to receive her purchase. She is leaning towards the woman and appears to be pulling at her school uniform; these details recall the chain of gestures that made up this type of transaction: the seller dunked a tumbler (rather than "glass," as the caption indicates) into a large bag of sunflower seeds, the buyer tilted forward and opened a pocket—in this case, the pocket of the school uniform—in order to receive and store the sunflower seeds comfortably for later consumption (holding them in one hand would have been impractical). Sold primarily by women of Roma origin who advertised their wares loudly ("Sunflower seeds, guys!" as the untranslated speech bubble specifies), they were (and less often, still are) the reason for heated arguments—on grounds of politeness—between people who spat the husks on the ground and those who did not. People in the know will thus



Fig. 3. The double-spread that captures Steaua's victory against FC Barcelona.

recognize these references to a small but important food item that references certain aspects of life during communism. This does not apply to Romanians in general, but only people who had these experiences: as sunflower seeds are sold in stores now, the sight of Roma women selling them has become a rarity. The sunflower seeds sold by the Roma woman remain an important clue that speaks not only to the discrimination of the Roma minority in Romania, one of the few constants in a country whose political climate remains volatile, but also to the unintentional but significant ways in which even schoolchildren subtly undermined the system by engaging in illicit commerce whilst clad in the standard party-issue uniforms.<sup>28</sup> This is one of many examples from Chiriță's impressive "structures of feeling" (Williams 132) inventory, which the book provides to an audience who might otherwise not have access to "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (Williams 132). From this perspective, *The Year of the Pioneer* functions as a usable repository of "supplementary clues and traces" (Sharma and Tygstrup 1), so that by reading it—and perhaps also doing additional research—both those already in the know and those unfamiliar with Romanian communism in the 1980s can have access to "expressive building blocks with the help of which a feeling eventually surfaces" (Sharma and Tygstrup 5).

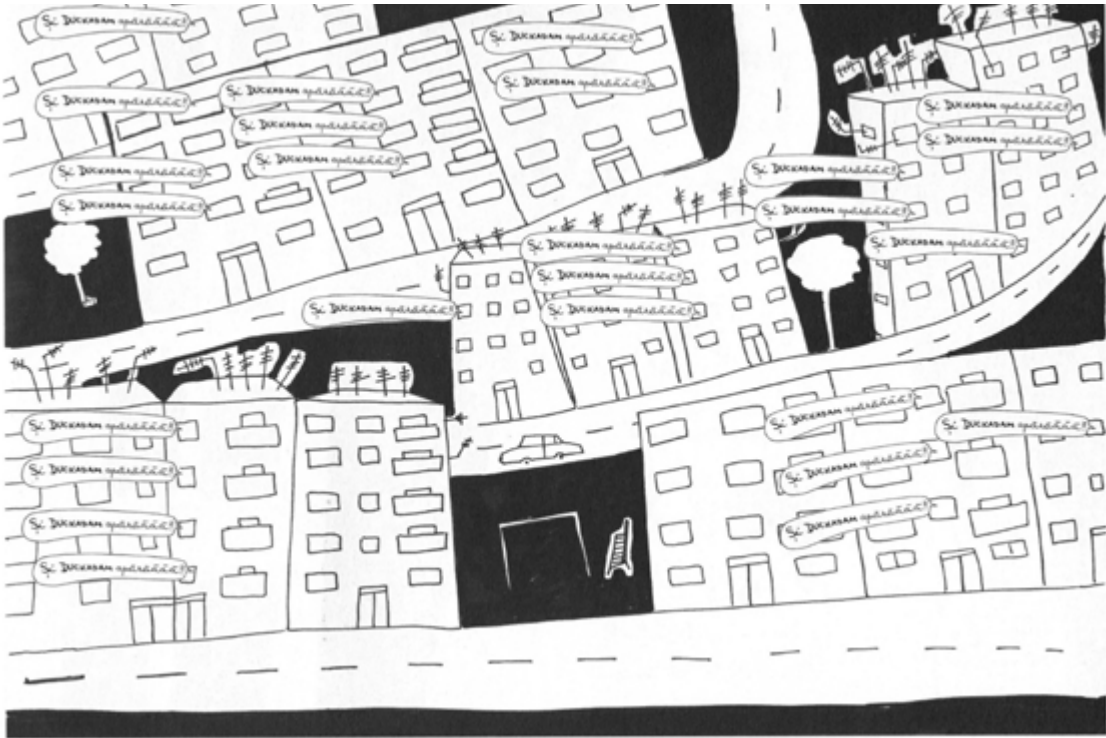


Fig. 4. The Romanian football team wins the European Cup Final in 1986.

However, in other contexts, Chirică's purposefully obscure references are illuminated by the quasi-universality of the experiences they capture. For example, it is easy to grasp the power of the social cohesion generated by watching a football game, even without a translation of the speech bubbles. In a double-page spread, Chirică depicts one of the proudest moments in the history of Romanian football, when Steaua București beat FC Barcelona and won the European Cup Final. The identical-looking blocks of flats sit silently in the night-time darkness, except for the same triumphant pronouncement by the commentator, after the Romanian goalkeeper defends no fewer than four penalty shots (Fig. 3).

On the page preceding the double-spread, Chirică explains the context, on the screen of an old television set: "May 7: The greatest moment in the history of Romanian football (and television). Steaua București wins the European Cup Final against FC Barcelona. We are all proud of Duckadam who saves 4 (four!!!) consecutive penalty shots." Even if the author once more opts for not translating the commentator's words, "Și Duckadam apăărăăă!" ["And Duckadam defeeeends!"], the context is probably familiar to most readers, the sad uniformity of the communist architecture suggests the rare unity of a population forced to live in circumstances of a shared

precarity. The antennae on the blocks of flats, inadequate even for capturing the one available TV station properly, signal the general disconnectedness of Romanians from the rest of the world, but also draw attention to the unique window to the West offered by organized sports (Fig.4).

Chirică camouflages the regime's dark side through various lists of precious items, such as *Pif* magazine, the East German *Neckermann* fashion catalogue, full of much-coveted items one could never order but was able to glance at longingly,<sup>29</sup> or some contraband one could buy on a certain female nude beach because the police would not set foot there. However, the harrowing stress of life under totalitarianism finds expression in panels depicting the constant search for precious items, mostly food- and hygiene-related. While not an exciting adventure (as a child might have perceived it), Chirică limns this search with both solemn seriousness and an eye for the humorous and the absurd. Throughout, the heavy gloom of life under the regime manifests through the cumulative effect of characters having to constantly come up with little ingenious ideas to improve their lot. The author dedicates panel after panel to a litany of such strategies: the mother makes pancakes every evening to warm up the cold kitchen; when in possession of that literal *rara avis*, a chicken, that could sometimes only be bought alive, the mother, squeamish about killing it herself, needs to find a benevolent (male) neighbor willing to cut off the bird's head in exchange for some meat; the children have to figure out how to meet their recycling quota and how to steal a few potatoes during their compulsory stint of "patriotic labor."

So deep is the preoccupation with insignificant items constantly subject to shortages that they haunt even the narrator's life-changing moments. Thus, when we find out, in the first pages of the book, that the author's father died around the beginning of the year 1986, what haunts the child as she gazes on the first lifeless body she has ever seen is the thought that her brother may be seizing the opportunity to eat the last of the Christmas candy. In the context of the book, we cannot interpret this as the insignificant worry of a seven-year-old who does not understand the gravity of her family's loss, but rather as a direct effect of the particular brutality of everyday life in 1980s Romania.

## Conclusion

In both books' accounts, daily life in Romania appears static and to a certain extent outside the personal space of the narrator. Chirică's child is protected less from the privations of life under communism than are Bandlien's adults from the difficulties of post-communist everyday life after communism, which exist on the margins of a bohemian lifestyle among artists and intellectuals in the cultural bubble of Bucharest. Although in both works the everyday space appears oddly comical and chaotic—sometimes even irksomely so—the narrators' detachment stands out, and appears to stem from

affection and nostalgia, rather than complacency. Despite the political factors that permeate private life, both Chirică and Bandlien suggest that, under adverse political and social circumstances, the vulnerable find sanctuary through the creation of a familiar space, either that of the traditional family or a community of allies. In a sense, minute social observation also works—even in retrospect—to protect the narrators from the very scenes they are observing, by transforming them from participants into observers and preservers of cultural memory. Their penchant for noting the quirky detail (instead of the tragic or dangerous one) forms a defense mechanism that sometimes obfuscates the gravity of certain situations by enveloping them in either nostalgia (Chirică) or fantastic scenarios (Bandlien).

In the contemporary landscape of Romanian comics, with its complicated background, its nostalgia for the (socialist) realist phase of communist comics and the few foreign publications that made it across the border at the time, as well as its many attempts to depart from this tradition in an environment where comics are still struggling for both recognition and financial support, it appears that autobiographical comics can play a distinct and important role. Such works, particularly those published by Hardcomics, provide a record of something that has not received sufficient attention in post-communist Romanian memorial culture: everyday life both before and after the communist regime. It strikes me as somewhat appropriate that this record of everyday life in Romania should appear through the marginalized medium of comics, whose full recognition on the Romanian literary scene has yet to take place.

## Notes

- \* Acknowledgements: Mihaela Precup's work on this chapter was supported by grant PNIII-1.1-TE-38/2018, offered by UEFISCDI.
- 1 For instance, the Czech Embassy initiated a five-book series of book-length comics that document lesser-known Czech-Romanian cultural and historical interaction. Published between 2014 and 2015, funded by a Czech company and edited by Librăria Jumătatea Plină, every book in the series has a modest print run of 500 copies, relatively standard for independent Romanian comics. All five comics are notebook-sized hardback books and approach topics from various historical periods. For instance, the first volume, *Mickey pe Dunăre* [Mickey on the Danube], illustrated by Cristian Dârstar, is based on a true story of what happens when one Czech family decides to leave Prague during the summer of 1968 and spend their holiday at the Romanian seaside. During their vacation, the Soviets invade Czechoslovakia and Romanian president Nicolae Ceaușescu makes a public

statement against the invasion and refuses to provide Romanian troops to support the Soviets. The family's stressful return home is told through the perspective of the youngest son, who is deeply concerned that his Mickey Mouse figurine will not be allowed to cross the border back into Czechoslovakia because it does not have a passport. Thus, the book does a good job of recording the absurdities and anxieties of everyday life behind the Iron Curtain, where the child accurately reads the communist authorities' understanding of Mickey Mouse as part of a hostile Western culture. There are many other instances where the publication of comics was made possible through help from foreign embassies and cultural institutions. In 2010, Culturesfrance/The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs sponsored the publication of the Romanian translation of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and the French Embassy supported the publication of Satrapi's *Embroideries*. The translation and publication of Edmond Baudoin's *Travesti*, an adaptation of Romanian writer Mircea Cărtărescu's eponymous novel (2011), was also made possible with help from the French Embassy in Bucharest. The Romanian Ministry for Culture also offers publication grants, but no sustained effort has been made to actively support the Romanian comics scene.

- 2 Both Bandlien and Chirică published more than one autobiographical book with Hardcomics. Thus, Bandlien also published *Strîmb Living: Five Years with Oskar* (2011) and *Strîmb Kids* (2013), two books where the action takes place in Norway, and Chirică recently published *Home Alone* (2016), about her struggle with depression. I have not included these texts in my analysis of works on everyday life in post/communist Romania because they cover different topics.
- 3 This can be evidenced by the only history of Romanian comics published so far, *Istoria benzii desenate românești* by Alexandru Ciubotariu and Dodo Niță. This comprehensive record of Romanian comics shows that adult-oriented content only appeared after the fall of the communist regime.
- 4 Titles mentioned by Ciubotariu and Niță include “Negru pe alb sau Îndrăzneala pedepsită” [On Paper or Audacity Punished], drawn by Ch. Schlupman (Vienna), “Desenatorul” [The Draughtsman], drawn by K. Pomerhantz and “Lingăul” [The Sycophant], drawn by Bahr (all parenthetical translations are my own). However, these are probably translations or adaptations of the original titles, which are not provided. There are also two French artists, mentioned only by their family names, Roux and Fournier.
- 5 Haplea is a simple-minded lazy man from the countryside who gets into all sorts of scrapes.
- 6 I have discussed this at some length in a book chapter titled “The Image of the Foreigner in Historical Romanian Comics under Ceaușescu’s Dictatorship” included in Carolene Ayaka and Ian Hague’s edited volume *Representing Multiculturalism in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2014).

- 7 Even though historical and travel comics were the most frequently published during communism, there were many other genres, such as Sci Fi, detective comics etc. *Cutezătorii*, *Luminița* and *Arici Pogonici* are examples of communist children's magazines that consistently published comics. Some of the comics are available online at [revistacutezatorii.blogspot.com](http://revistacutezatorii.blogspot.com). For an in-depth analysis of the two versions of *Burebista* (a comic about King Burebista (82BC-44BC), a leader of the Dacian tribes) and other historical comics, see my chapter "The Image of the Foreigner in Historical Comics under Ceaușescu's Dictatorship."
- 8 According to Mirela Tanta, the second socialist realist phase announced by Ceaușescu in 1971 "was not a return to Soviet Socialist Realism, not even the local version of it as practiced in Romania between 1948-1960s. It was, rather, a dizzying palimpsest of unstable messages exposing from within, as it were, the impossibility of transposing Socialist Reality into art as Ceaușescu had dreamed of and articulated throughout his many long and wooden speeches" (3). In her analysis of state portraits of the Ceaușescu couple, Tanta further argues that painters during this second "socialist realist" phase managed to produce subversive art, "undermining symbols of power not by mocking them but by overusing them until the visual language stopped serving the power of the State" (8). The connection with comics should probably be further explored, as one of these painters, Valentin Tănase, was also a comic book artist who illustrated one of the two versions of the *Burebista* comic published in *Cutezătorii* in 1980.
- 9 For instance, this is the reason why the founders of the best-sold Romanian superhero comic, *HAC*, have claimed, in an announcement posted on their facebook page, they had to cease publication in late 2017 (<https://www.facebook.com/supererou/>).
- 10 Some examples of Romanian facebook groups where such debates are currently taking place (alongside other comics-related topics) are *Banda Benzilor Desenate* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/bandaBD/>) and Dodo Niță's blog *Benzi Desenate Românești* (<http://benzidesenateromanesti.blogspot.de/>).
- 11 In fact, the only all-comics magazine published in Romania before 1989 was *Pif*. All of the other children's magazines contained comics alongside other content, such as poems, games, articles etc.
- 12 The factual information from this section relies on Ciubotariu and Niță's chapter about post-1989 comics.
- 13 For instance, *Ciutanul* by Ionuț Mihai Grăjdeanu is a planned three-volume football-themed comic. The story is built around a fictitious legendary football player's son, nicknamed *Ciutanul* (the title is a regionalism from the Romanian province Dobrogea, and it translates as "kiddo"), who is also discovered to be very talented and whose father was apparently the subject of an experiment performed by the evil Phoenix laboratories, sponsored by a billionaire. The first 134-full-color-page volume was published in 2010 by Dacica Publishers, with a print run



of 1,000 copies, and it sold out, which means that the book fared better than most alternative comics, and its success was probably also bolstered by the topic, in a country where football is an extremely important sport; 500 more copies came out subsequently (Grăjdeanu). In 2014, the 106-page second volume was self-published as a “limited edition” (Grăjdeanu), and the third volume is yet to come out. *Mila 23*, written by George Drăgan and illustrated by Alex Talambă (2012), a slender 70-page volume whose print run is 2,500, is part biographical novel and part fairy tale about the childhood of one of Romania’s most important sportspeople, Ivan Pațaichin, a Romanian sprint canoer who won 7 medals in several summer Olympics between 1972 and 1984. He was born in the village Mila 23, close to the Danube Delta, and the author attempts to give both him and his birthplace legendary status. Alex Talambă’s previous book, *Elabuga* (2011), is a 60-page graphic novel about the story of a German prisoner of war in the Russian camp Elabuga. It is a dark story that combines well-researched period details with dreamlike sequences. Maria Surducan, who is, alongside her sister, Ileana Surducan, one of the most important contemporary comic book authors, published a 96-page full-color steampunk adaptation of a popular Romanian fairy tale, *Prâslea cel voinic și merele de aur* (Vellant Publishers, 2014) in the wake of a successful crowdfunding campaign (3,000 Euros for 300 copies). A substantial amount of the Surducan sisters’ impressive body of work (some of which is in English) is available for free on their respective websites, [mariasurducan.com](http://mariasurducan.com) and [ileanasurducan.com](http://ileanasurducan.com).

- 14 The data is provided by long-standing Romanian newspaper *Curierul Național*, in an article titled “East European Comic Con 2017 – un eveniment pentru toate vârstele” [East European Comic Con 2017 – an Event for All Ages].
- 15 The list of titles mentioned in this chapter is by no means exhaustive. There are many other examples of fanzines, one-shots, graphic biographies etc., as well as webcomics that are occasionally also collected and printed.
- 16 A version of this subchapter was initially published on the *Comics Forum* website as “Blueprints for a Forward-Dawning Futurity”: Brynjar Åbel Bandlien’s *Strîmb Life* (2009) and *Strîmb Living – 5 Years with Oskar* (2011).”
- 17 This is a good example of the mix of Romanian and English that many of the Hardcomics books display. “Florarese” translates as “flower girls” and “piscotarii” is a pejorative term that could be loosely translated as “the ladyfinger-grabbers,” a label popularly applied to those who only attend gallery openings in order to drink the champagne and eat the ladyfingers customarily offered for free by the organizers.
- 18 In an interview, I asked Bandlien what his motivation was for portraying himself here as a loafer, blissfully smiling, hands behind his head, as if he did not work. However, Bandlien drew my attention to the fact that, despite appearances, he does portray himself and Manuel working in this part of the book: “The cover shows even more clearly how we in fact are sitting inside a bubble

- hovering above Bucharest. I guess that is how I saw us at the time... living from day to day, dancing at parties and hanging around Bucharest with our friends in a more or less decadent lifestyle. I wished for us to remain unchanged by all the situations and events that were taking place around us (...).”
- 19 Gillian Whitlock proposes the term “autographics” in her article “Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of the Comics.”
- 20 A similar mixture of fact and fiction can be found in Bandlien’s third comic book, *Strîmb Kids* (2015).
- 21 I am here referencing José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, where he relies on Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* to suggest that “queerness in its utopian connotations promises a human that is not yet here, thus disrupting any ossified understanding of the human” (25-26).
- 22 As Lavinia Stan convincingly argues, even attempts to educate future generations about the human rights abuses of the two dictatorships have been postponed or performed poorly: “Lingering nationalist and communist sympathies among historians and teachers, as well as within research and education institutions (such as the Romanian Academy and the Ministry of Education) procrastinated the rewriting of history textbooks and perpetuated popular nostalgia about a regime that many Romanians consider more just, safe, equitable, and predictable than the post-communist democracy” (234).
- 23 One of the most popular such facebook pages, whose target audience is Andreea Chirică’s generation, is *Generația cu Cheia la Gât* (<https://www.facebook.com/Generatia.Cu.Cheia.La.Gat/>), which has 323,857 likes (Accessed 21 April 2018).
- 24 In some cases, the Romanian mainstream media even encouraged criticism of film directors who approached some of the thornier topics associated with the Ceaușescu dictatorship, such as the abortion ban explored in *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, a 2007 film by Cristian Mungiu.
- 25 The fact that the English is broken on purpose (the author uses ungrammatical terms such as “hided” as the past tense form of the verb “to hide,” for example) is made plain by the glossary (titled “List of some not very English terms and phrases I used in this book. Yes, they are Romanian words, very popular in 1986”), where various Romanian terms and concepts used in the book are explained at some length in advanced-level English.
- 26 Verderey translates “etatizare” as “the process of statizing” (40).
- 27 If one compares Andreea Chirică’s book to another memoir about growing up during the communist dictatorship, Marzena Sowa and Sylvain Savoya’s *Marzi*, it becomes even more evident that Sowa (whose partner, Savoya, who is the illustrator, also visited Poland before embarking on the book project) wanted to create a space of memory accessible to a wide Western audience (her book is written in French).

- 28 In this close reading, I have used my own memories, since I am about the same age as the author and am able to decode many of the visual clues that have already become obscure to younger generations.
- 29 Many people had the catalogue clothes tailored, with varying results. See the article “Moda în care nu aveam voie să fim mai frumoși ca Ceaușeștii” (The Fashion That Did Not Allow Us to Be More Beautiful Than the Ceaușescus).

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# Eszter Szép

## Avatars and Iteration in Contemporary Hungarian Autobiographical Comics

*I dedicate this chapter to those who have studied the history of comics in Hungary and upon whose shoulders I stand.*

Comics in Hungary has a peculiar relationship to literature. The first proto-comic was written and printed by the most canonized 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist, Mór Jókai; during state socialism adaptation of literary works were the only form of comics that was tolerated, which, as Dunai argues, made it impossible for comics to develop into an independent medium. Moreover, the first commercially successful graphic novel<sup>1</sup> contains quotes from and allusions to the Hungarian literary canon and uses an influential circle of canonized poets from the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and zombies as its main characters (Olivér Csepella: *Nyugat + Zombik*, 2017). *Nyugat + Zombik*, a one-shot book format comic published by a literary publisher, indulges in Tarantino-like postmodern puns and violence, and it also contains severe criticism of the contemporary Hungarian political climate. The zombies attack the group of poets around the influential literary magazine *Nyugat* (established in 1908, its programmatic name meaning “West”) because they have departed from the true Hungarian ways and have become too urbanized and not nationalistic enough.

Such political statements are atypical of comics in Hungary.<sup>2</sup> To provide context for the sudden appearance of autobiographical comics containing political commentary as well as allusions to literature in the 2010s, in the first part of this chapter, I survey the history of comics in Hungary from its beginnings in 19<sup>th</sup> century political and satirical magazines to 1989, by which time comics had become associated with literary adaptations and entertainment. In the public eye, it was conceptually unimaginable to attribute literary values to comics or to consider it as a medium of self-expression or of political commentary. Naturally, subcultures, such as creators of music-related

zines, or individuals with access to American or Franco-Belgian comics, were aware of the rich potential of comics as a means of expression. The general public, however, was not.

The “golden era” of Hungarian comics between 1957 and 1975 developed in isolation from American or Western-European tendencies. Because these comics retell stories of canonized pieces of literature, such as *Les Misérables* (1957), *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1958), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1959), as well as a number of novels of Hungarian literary history,<sup>3</sup> these comics are particularly text-heavy. They typically have white male protagonists, often adventurers, and were published serialized in entertaining or political periodicals. In 1975 one of the most prolific comics artists, Pál Korcsmáros, died. Though his comics were reissued and other artists continued work on comics, this year is considered to be the end of the golden era. Literary-adaptation comics are still popular: even decades after the downfall of state socialism they are still reprinted, often in a revised or edited form,<sup>4</sup> and new works are still made in this spirit. However, the sudden availability of some Western European and American comics titles at the end of the 80s and in the 90s was a major influence in the childhood of the generation that in the 2000s chose to read comics from a global English language market. This generation of comics artists reflect on their childhood comics heroes and the latest American/Francophone comics titles in their own works either by direct references, stylistic influence, or in their plots.

The history of Hungarian comics lacks first-person genres, and this heritage is important to know when turning to comics autobiography in Hungary. In the second part of the chapter I will focus on comics as self-expression and as a separate medium that can approach literary qualities (such as a richness of tones, a wide scale of consciously used tools, a structured narrative in an array of genres) without being an adaptation of literature. The first and influential works by Dániel Csordás and Gergely Oravecz are rich in international influences, and cannot be imagined without the internet. These first autobiographical comics series appeared online on the creators’ personal blogs in 2009 and 2010.<sup>5</sup>

The works of Csordás and Oravecz, as well as of Zoltán Koska and Katalin Sárdi, give the impression that contemporary Hungarian autographers are drawn to the personal and towards irony. The above artists primarily create comics on their everyday experiences, musings, and memories. Non-fiction comics commenting on historical and political events as do Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi (whose works are available in Hungarian<sup>6</sup>), remain rare.

## **A brief history of Hungarian comics up to 1989**

**I**t is a little known fact even in Hungary that Mór Jókai (1825-1904), whose historical novels are compulsory readings in secondary schools, wrote the script of the

first Hungarian protocomics *Gömböcz and Csukli* [Gömböcz and Csukli], published in ten instalments between 13 January and 10 February 1877. Illustrated by János Jankó (1833-1896), these works show the influence of Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz*, which is not at all surprising given the overall impact of German language and Austrian culture in Hungary until the first world war. Jókai and Jankó's protocomics appeared in Jókai's political satirical weekly magazine, *Az Üstökös* [The Comet]. The names of the characters hint at their physical appearance: the text printed under the pictorial element reveals the adventures of a round and short (Gömböcz, from the Hungarian word for sphere) and a thin and tall gentleman (Csukli, resembling "collapse from lack of strength" in Hungarian). The subtitle, "a novel of adventures in verses," reveals that the creators themselves did not have a word for this new means of expression. Indeed, the Hungarian word for comics, *képregény*, which literally means picture-novel, was generally in use in as late as the 1940s.

Comics has been tied with political satirical magazines (*Borsszem Jankó*, *Kakas Márton*, *Mátyás Diák*) and family magazines until the 1930s, and served either as comic relief or as political commentary. Magazines edited by literary figures, such as prose writers and critics, also regularly published either original or translated comics (*Fidibusz*, edited by Jenő Heltai or *Új Idők*, edited by Ferenc Herceg). Dailies and weeklies of the 1930s regularly published redrawn or translated versions of American comics. *Katzenjammer Kids*, for example, was published in 1918 in *Képes Újság* [Magazine with Pictures] and then, under the Hungarian title of *Cini, Dini és Tini* between 1936 and 1938 in *Hári János*, the first magazine publishing almost exclusively comics (Kertész 36). Opper's *Happy Hooligan* was also published in *Képes Újság* under the title *Boldog Gazemberek* [Happy Hooligans] (Kertész 36). Felix the Cat was renamed as Sicc; Mickey Mouse, Betty Boop, Secret Agent X9 were popular (Kertész 42, 47), as well as Károly Mühlbeck's original comics commenting on current events (Kertész 42-43). However, due to the first Anti-Jewish Act in 1938, it was increasingly difficult to keep these periodicals in print as they were often owned or edited by people of Jewish origin (Kiss and Szabó, Kertész 78). The collapse of this diverse magazine scene was devastating for artists as well as for the medium of comics in Hungary.

After 1945, privately owned papers were banned, and most papers were owned by political parties. Comics was allowed to be featured again in children's magazines and in the newly founded entertaining satirical weekly, *Ludas Matyi*. Picture stories without speech balloons were not rare. At this time, comics was equally seen as a means to spread Communist ideology and build socialism, which was desirable, and as a threat carrying Western imperialist ideology, which was to be avoided. The new magazine for children, *Pajtás* [Mate], started in December 1946, was an important



platform where comics by Hungarian authors as well as series from the French *Vaillant* could be printed until 1989. After the Communist takeover in 1949, all cultural products were categorized either as supported, banned, or tolerated, and comics, after much debate, fell into the latter category.

Under state socialism, comics was created with the aim of ideological as well as cultural education. Consequently, comics was no longer thought of as an independent medium addressing issues concerning of politics or contemporary culture, but rather as an inferior sub-literary form. The association of comics with non-serious content, childishness, an association reinforced in the comics translated in the 1980s and 1990s, and sub-literary qualities is present to this day. For example, the most prestigious independent bookstore in Budapest, Írók *Boltja*, referred to the works of David B, Daniel Knowles, Jack Kirby, Chris Ware, and others as “fine art albums,” not as *képregény*.<sup>7</sup>

The golden era of Hungarian comics started in 1955 and peaked in the 1970s (Kiss, “A képregény születése”). In 1955 graphic artist Sándor Gugi and writer Tibor Cs. Horváth began their collaboration on adapting canonized literature into comics. Their model was *Classics Illustrated*, and their argument for the legitimacy of comics was twofold. On the one hand, they referred to *Vaillant*, the only available comics magazine from the West, which demonstrated the success of merging comics and communist ideology. On the other hand, Cs. Horváth and Gugi argued that comics can render literature more popular and can make readers curious about the original novels.

The first work Cs. Horváth and Gugi adapted was Jules Verne’s *The Children of Captain Grant*, which was published in 1955 in Russian, in a periodical addressed to the Russian-learning youth.<sup>8</sup> The duo started making comics for several periodicals, including *Új Világ [New World]* and *Szabadságharcos [Freedom Fighter]* (Kertész 111-112). History, however, overwrote all their plans, and inadvertently helped them, when the Hungarian revolution broke out on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1956. The short-lived attempt to get rid of communist rule was crushed by the invading Soviet army on November 7th. Retribution followed, and in 1957 it was decided that new, entertaining magazines should be launched to provide diversion for the people (Kertész 116-117).

The weekly magazine of puzzles, riddles and jokes, *Füles* [Füles is a typical name for a donkey], which became seminal in the history of literary adaptation comics, was first published in February 1957. Until he was dismissed from *Füles* in 1993, which was also the year of his death, Cs. Horváth provided the script for the great majority of comics, which were illustrated by artists such as Sándor Gugi, Ernő Zórád, Pál Korcsmáros, Imre Sebők, Ferenc Sajdik, István Endródi, Attila Dargay, and later Attila Fazekas.

Literary adaptation became the dominant form of comics published in Hungary. Non-adaptation comics included series for children with (mainly) animal characters inspired by the French *Pif* and pictorial stories in the literary and art magazine *Mozgó Világ* [World in Motion] beginning in 1975. Though the editors of *Mozgó Világ* call the experimental intermedial visual narratives they publish *képregény*, these pieces often lack any attempt at narratives, and are sequences of images and photonovel-like seminarratives (Dunai “A Kádár-kori képregény”). Despite these exceptions, literary adaptation comics dominated. It was inconceivable to think about comics as a medium of self-expression, and the works of the American underground were, naturally, unknown.

On a very basic level, it was the prestige of literature that made comics possible. However, as much as literature legitimized comics, it provided a constant target for attackers: compared to the original novel, comics was seen as inferior and even as an act of violence (Kertész 200-225). Comics, which was now exclusively associated with literary adaptation, was constantly debated, and its legitimacy was questioned repeatedly. Moreover, being associated with comics was hindrance for the artists involved in production. Graphic artist Ernő Zórád, for example, had to publish his illustrations for a novel under someone else’s name in 1960, and later could not work as an illustrator at all due to the bias against comics (Kertész 138-139).

It is in this context that writer Tibor Cs. Horváth was busy adapting Hungarian and world literature into comics. There is no pattern to the works he chose to adapt. The workload was immense, as he wrote the comics not only for *Füles* but also for *Magyar Ifjúság* [Hungarian Youth, the weekly of the Hungarian Young Communist League]; for the already mentioned *Pajtás, Tábornék* [Camp fire], *Kisdobos* [Little Pioneer] which were the magazines of the Hungarian Pioneers League; *Lobogó* [Flag], the weekly of the Hungarian Defence League; and many more. The artists working with Cs. Horváth were experimenting with matching their styles with particular stories to create atmosphere. Furthermore, they had to learn how to draw in an economic way that did not compromise the quality of their work but allowed them to meet their deadlines. The pressure on the artists is indicated by the fact that Pál Korcsmáros drew 238 pages of comics, with six panels on a page, for *Füles* in 1957 (Kertész 137). Between 1957 and 1960 Cs. Horváth wrote half of the comics published in the country, and Korcsmáros illustrated 40% of all comics (Kertész 137).

Aesthetically speaking, these literary adaptation comics were limited by the fact that text dominated over illustration. Cs. Horváth designed the page layout and the proportion of text to image, which resulted in limited space and limited creative possibilities for the artists. Dialogue is very rare and the panels are numbered even after the audience has become familiar with the conventional ways of reading comics pages. Though this aesthetics is associated with a specific

time period, literary adaptation comics are made to this day, and the classics are reprinted (*Szép Kép-Regény-Történet* 48).

Due to the dominance of adaptation and the lack of original narratives, any original story created in this era is referred to as *szerzői képregény* [auteur comics] (Verebics), even if the actual comic itself is exemplary of a certain genre rather than of individual expression, and even if the comic itself is a result of a coproduction between writer and artist. However, as autobiography or non-fiction comics are generally absent from this era, I consider these works as instances where Cs. Horváth and others proved themselves as original writers of fictional comics scripts.

### **Comics as self-expression: Autobiography in contemporary comics**

**I**n the 1980s, a sudden boom in comics production took place targeting primarily children: original Hungarian comics (based on Hungarian animation films), and French comics were published. Comics was decreasingly seen as a low form of literature, and became associated with childhood and entertainment. In 1989, Marvel's Spiderman arrived along with other heroes and superheroes, such as Batman, Superman, Conan, and the Punisher ([kepregenydb.hu](http://kepregenydb.hu)). The most influential publisher of these years is Semic Interprint. These comics were read by most artists who are active today, and they had defining role in showing more dynamic and independent way of storytelling than the dominant literary adaptation comics.

To a great extent, autobiographical comics were enabled by the possibilities provided by the internet: on the one hand, in the 2000s, importing international comics made it possible for this English-speaking generation to keep in touch with American publications at a time when hardly any comics were translated and published in Hungary (Bayer 55, Szabó 43). On the other hand, spontaneously created online communities provided platforms for debate (Szabó 44). It is in this relatively rich online culture that both Dániel Csordás and Gergely Oravecz started publishing comics about their everyday lives on their respective blogs. I would like to note that there are further active Hungarian artists working in autobiographical genres: Zoltán Koska has been a producer of self-published comic books containing his fiction and non-fiction stories for years; Katalin Sárdi has recently started making comics and zines that utilize her own memories and experiences; and László Lénárd has created experimental and highly poetical comics containing references to a lyrical "I." For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will limit myself to an examination of the different approaches to representing the cartoon self and to storytelling in Csordás' and Oravecz's comics.

Dániel Csordás started his multiple award-winning comics blog, [csordasdaniel.blog.hu](http://csordasdaniel.blog.hu), in 2009, and makes his living as a storyboard artist. He received the Hungarian Comics Association's Alfabéta-prize for best comics in various categories in 2010, 2012 and 2013, and was listed among the top ten cultural blogs in the Goldenblog blog contest in 2011, 2012 and 2013. Csordás' stories center around his family and the challenges of everyday life, such as shopping, raising children, or travelling. Currently, Csordás does not update his blog; he is working on modern comics adaptations of canonized Hungarian poetry, using his energetic lines to create witty works unlike those of classic literary adaptation comics. Rather than evoking traditional literary adaptation comics, Csordás' adaptations are rich in humor, irony, and references to popular culture that made his comics blog so popular.

Gergely Oravecz published a comics diary on his blog, [blossza.blogspot.com](http://blossza.blogspot.com), for one hundred and twenty-three consecutive days between May 1<sup>st</sup> 2010 and August 31<sup>st</sup> 2010. While Oravecz supports himself as a professional illustrator, his work has gained acclaim with the Alfabéta-prize for the best comic strip in the following year, and publication of his work in 2015 by a small press publisher, Nero Blanco Comics. Whereas Csordás uses full comics pages for his compositions, Oravecz creates four-panel strips. His topics include work, family, and anger, and his focus is on the random, small, often repetitive events of daily life: the bus leaves, people watch birds, he goes shopping, the revolving door revolves. Oravecz's more recent work is a ten-episode contemplative and associative series published on the website of *Műút Literary, Art, and Critical Journal*. This series, *Még alakul*, [In Progress], offers highly poetic meditations in comics form in which individual episodes are connected by a creative consciousness as well as by strict formal constraints.

The autobiographical comics of Csordás and Oravecz represent a new type of graphic narrative in Hungary, since most contemporary Hungarian comics projects are aimed at creating Hungarian versions of various American comics genres (adventure, superheroes, steampunk, parody, history, and science fiction). Although Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* were both published in Hungarian, neither of them could reach a significant readership outside comics subculture, and neither of these works, which are so canonical in the history of Western comics and comics scholarship (Beatty and Woo 1-16) are referred to by the artists. Csordás cites David B., Aleksandar Zograf, Dino Buzzati, Jack Kirby, Frank Miller, and the Hungarian painter Ferenc Lantos as influences. Zograf's contemplative comics were published in Hungarian in two volumes (2006), and his technique of connecting the history of a place or of an idea to the way it is encountered in the present is often echoed in Csordás' work. However, Csordás is more concerned about popular culture than classical forms of cultural heritage. For example, Iron Maiden and Depeche Mode, his favourite bands, appear in his comics not only as the nexus



Fig. 1. Gergely Oravecz - A strip from *Blossza*. Courtesy of the artist.

of fan-related activities, such as collecting records, attending concerts, and buying merchandize; their lyrics are cited as a meaningful frame of reference as he faces the challenges of daily life, such as raising young children. Fandom and fatherhood cannot be separated, and Csordás’ associations and tendency to draw visual metaphors results in a very different comics diary than Oravecz’s.

Compared to Csordás’ representation of the birth of his own son with images showing the baby riding a wild horse, travelling on a fast train, and surfing a gigantic wave (#166, 20 March 2013), or his tendency to connect moments of the present to his childhood memories (#154, 21 Dec 2012), Oravecz is a realist who focuses on mundane details that become interesting when represented through his unique perspective. As I will show shortly, the way his avatar behaves, thinks, and looks like are under constant scrutiny in Oravecz’s ironic strips. Oravecz’s major inspirations are Eddie Campbell and James Kochalka, neither of whom have been published in Hungarian so far. Whereas Kochalka’s *American Elf* ran daily for fourteen years, Oravecz did not intend his series to run as long as Kochalka’s did. He thought of *Blossza* as a mental and artistic challenge to test if he was capable of finding the time to produce a daily strip. It is little wonder that a number of the stories focus on the necessity or compulsion to make comics. Strips yet to be made haunt the hero, while the narrator of the text painstakingly documents if the timeline of the strips has been breached. Such gestures make the reader conscious of the burden of producing a strip within 24 hours, and contribute to the reader’s appreciation of yet another finished comic.

According to Charles Hatfield, irony is one of the defining features of comics’ authenticity (Hatfield 128-151). Through Hatfield’s notion of “ironic authentication,” Oravecz creates the credibility and the likeability of his autobiographical avatar, from now on referred to as Gergő. One way to achieve authenticity with irony is to share the burden of creation with readers and involve them in the paradox of not being able to live and create at the same time. The panels of the strip made on August

12<sup>th</sup> 2010, for example, introduce a group of people, some of them Gergő's father's colleagues, vacationing together. The bored narrator provides a list of stereotypical character traits found among the group: almost as a rule, someone will provide stoic commentary, someone will make bad jokes, and someone else will overuse a certain word because they feel it to be stylish. These characters are shown in the first three panels of the strip. A break in this rhythm comes with the fourth and last panel, where the narrator comments on Oravec's own avatar, saying that among the members of any group "there's someone who's just trying to survive." The structure of the narrator's text in the caption does not change, but the visual focus of the last panel turns away from the others and offers pictorial self-reflection by showing Gergő sitting alone and thinking about his daily strips. A thought bubble shows a four-panel strip with question marks in each panel, revealing his lack of inspiration. However, the avatar, the narrator, the graphiateur, the author, and the reader all know that the logic of the diary requires a new comic each day, and that the self-defeating feeling of incompetence cannot be the final note of this story. The strip contradicts the coda and asserts competence by its mere existence, thereby confirming an ironic relationship between author and avatar.

Self-reflection is a central theme in *Blossza*. Oravec's strips successfully balance the distance necessary for understanding oneself and the closeness of revealing and representing the inward look (Hatfield 114). The complexity of making claims about oneself in the medium of comics is made clear in as early as the first strip (May 1, 2010). Here Gergő confidently declares to his younger brother and to his readers that he will start a series of daily strips. In the second panel, his brother refers to Kochalka and suggests making comics on not having a topic to make a comic about, just like the American cartoonist. Gergő claims that can never happen to him, but the last panel contradicts this confidence: he is shown staring at a blank page, pencil in hand, swearing. This first strip introduces the idea of failure as narrative theme, and, just like the already quoted strip on Gergő's holiday, it claims and denies its own existence (Hatfield 125). Questioning the author's competence happens with the same gestures that frame the avatar to be forever in a state of creation, in a state of waiting for something to be born as a result of his drawing. Among Hungarian artists who make comics about their lives, Oravec is the most concerned about showing how comics are produced and created, and he is the most successful in creating narrative and visual discourses that paradoxically and simultaneously claim that it is impossible to create them.

Another instance in which Oravec emphasizes the constructed nature of comics as well as of autobiography is the strip entitled "Therapy" (July 16, 2010). This five-panel strip offers variations on Gergő's reaction to a given unpleasant situation, making it clear that the cartoon self is born as a result of a process, and that its birth is always



in dialogue with the medium of expression (Fig. 1). The opening panel shows an unusually sporty Gergő missing the tram in spite of his efforts. The following four panels elaborate on this situation by showing alternative reactions to this event: swearing, spitting, giving the finger, and artistic sublimation. However, the text states the exact opposite of what the character is doing: “I do not swear loudly,” “I do not spit,” “I do not show the finger.” The X-signs in the bottom right corner of each panel negatively comment on the represented action but do not deny it. The desirable though not approved courses of action this way remain visually real. The last panel aligns the narrator’s text with represented action in the panel, confirmed by the affirmative sign of the tick: the correct course of action is to make comics, as the caption states, “because I have learned that one can make comics out of such events, and the anger is gone as if in a blink of an eye. (Not to mention that one is considered a genius for it and is worshipped like a god).” Gergő in the panel says “Sure thing,” and a joking piece of advice for the reader is inserted at the end, outside the panel: “Give it a try.” Naturally, the irony is the contradictory nature of the approved version of the cartoon self. The rejected versions are more consistent with the behavior of the character in other strips, but the naively enthusiastic version is the one that is holding a five-panel comic strip, posing as the authentic version of the author who has made this very strip.<sup>9</sup> Though revisiting the construction of the autobiographical avatar is not as central in Csordás’ strips as in Oravecz’s, Csordás’ comics also occasionally reflect on their constructed nature with ironic gestures. One such instance is comic #100, (January 23, 2011) (Fig. 2). In the first tier, Csordás reveals how he draws the face of his avatar, who from now on will be referred to as “Dániel.” A step-by-step guide is provided thereby opening up the possibility of anyone drawing Dániel, and rendering the autobiographical origin of the character uncertain. The series of heads become progressively more defined with the addition of the mouth and eyes, but the final stage is still very abstract and does not have many character traits. Still, by the 100<sup>th</sup> episode the reader has learned to see this abstract face as Dániel’s face uniquely belonging to Csordás’ character and repeated in his autobiographical comics. However, the illusory nature of such attribution is revealed by the fact that the lines used to draw the six heads are the same: this is one head, one gesture of drawing, repeated six times, with additional layers of detail added in Photoshop.

The sequence suggests that the avatar’s head could be repeated in the exact same way endlessly. This playful idea, which is a simple trick on a digital drawing pad, asks questions about an important topic of comics scholarship: the drawn line’s relationship to personal self-expression and transparency in a digital context. Thinking of the artist’s line as trace, as Jared Gardner does in “Storylines,” or as a manuscript, as Hillary Chute does (“Comics Form and Narrating Lives” 112), is complicated by the possibility of endlessly repeating both one’s hand drawn lines



and the autobiographical avatar drawn with these lines. Repetition in the context of digital drawing cannot be perceived as an adversary of the personal or as a challenge to what makes a line unique and individual. As all of the heads are made with Csordás' line and all of them record the trace of his hand, variation, layering, and repetition (as well as training and social constraints, as Baetens has argued) need to be incorporated into a conception of the line in autobiographical genres in a digital context. The single original moment of creation, however, needs to be supplemented by the idea that the hand drawn line can be copied and layered endlessly.

At the bottom of the page Csordás returns to the idea of repetition and identical copies, while also introducing abstraction. He shows a version of his avatar three times, thereby offering variations on representing himself in various media and also by varying codes of abstraction. First, he is represented as a drawn cartoon avatar customary to his comics; second, as his cartoon avatar is layered over a black and white photograph of himself and redefines the boundaries of his body; and finally he shows a black and white photograph of himself staring into the camera (and at the reader) with a relatively blank expression. As true children of digital drawing, all the three of the figures are represented as thinking in binary code, either 1 or 0, but the figures make perfect sense in a decimal system as well, celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> comic strip. The second version of the avatar is the perfect copy of both version one and version three, and the sequence emphasizes the contrast between Csordás' energetic line and his impassive face as captured by the camera. The more spontaneous line of the drawing is compared to the photographic image, and the second figure demonstrates the power of drawing to shape reality.

It is not unusual for Csordás to insert photographs of works of art in his comics. To my mind, this gesture places his work in an art history context and raises a number of questions. Consider the colorful bright sky that serves as a background to the three avatars: its geometric nature as well as the naively shaped clouds evoke Belgian Surrealist René Magritte's paintings. Magritte frequently used this motif as a background to variations on the figure with the bowler hat, as well as in other landscapes. In Csordás' comic, the difference in detail between background and figure makes manifest the constructed nature of all three types of representation. Drawing is low-resolution compared to the colorful orgy of the background and to the realistic detail of photography, however, neither of the latter two are as alive as the first figure. Photography brings an unexpected textural richness to the monochromatic comic, but the artists' tranquil pose and expression contrasts to the variety of activities he engages in and to the range of emotions that are expressed in the series. By emphasizing the artificiality of the background in its colors and design, Csordás evokes other images generated fully in digital environments without the trace of a recognizable human line.

## Conclusion

The autobiographical comics of Gergely Oravecz and Dániel Csordás are unique in the contemporary Hungarian comics scene, because so far these are the longest running series of self-referential comics. Five years after the online publication of *Blossza*, Oravecz published this collection with Blanco Nero Comix. This is a dream that appears in Csordás' diary comics as well, but one that has not come true yet. After *Blossza*, Oravecz published two short autobiographical series, namely *Még alakul* [In Progress], and *Dolgok* [Things], both on the webpage for *Műút Literary, Art, and Critical Journal*, and four short autobiographical strips on another literary journal's webpage, *Szifonline*, in 2018. Csordás, however, has abandoned autobiography and no longer updates his blog.

In the current contemporary comics scene, which is centered around festivals and comics fairs, most comics artists self-publish roughly one hundred copies in the form of booklets or zines, and small press comics publishers usually print 150-2000 copies. The current Hungarian comics world painfully lacks an online or offline journal where artists can create comics about their lives or on any other subject. The current absence of short form comics from mainstream or cultural magazines, and the financial failure of Hungarian-made comics magazines, is unfortunate. There is, however, a growing interest in reading comics in translation that has resulted in increasingly more mainstream American (Marvel, DC, Vertigo) and European (*Incal*, *Blacksad*) comics publications since 2016. I hope that this new readership will eventually discover and support independent Hungarian comics, creating possibilities for domestic comics publications as well.

## Notes

- 1 The first book format one-shot comics, which we might call graphic novels in the sense Baetens and Frey defined the term, were published around 2010. Chronologically the first one is Dániel Csordás' *Nocturne* in 2008, which was followed by Miklós Felvidéki's *Némajáték* [Pantomime] in 2011. The most critically acclaimed graphic novel is *Slusszkulcs Klán* [Car Key Clan] by Márton Hegedűs, published in 2012. Having seen the commercial failure of these three graphic novels, literary publishers withdrew from publishing comics, and book format stories were self-published until *Nyugat + Zombik* in 2017.
- 2 Editorial cartoons and caricature, however, often criticize politics. See the works of Marabu.
- 3 A detailed bibliography of literary-adaptation comics in *Füles* was published by Ferenc Kiss.

- 4 Ferenc Vincze compared the original and the redrawn and reedited version of one such literary adaptation comic in detail in „Egy képregény-adaptáció kiadástörténete” [The Publication History of a Literary-Adaptation Comic.]
- 5 The importance of online forums and connections has been recognized by Maksa in “Közelítések” and Szabó in “A magyar képregény.”
- 6 *Maus* was published twice, first in 1989 by Napra-forgó, then the complete *Maus* in 2004 by Ulpius-ház, but both translations left readers of the original unsatisfied. *Persopolis* was published in two volumes in 2007 and 2008 by Nyitott könyvműhely.
- 7 <https://www.facebook.com/irokboltja/photos/a.129095817120415/2226401404056502/?type=3&theater>
- 8 Russian was the compulsory foreign language for all since 1949.
- 9 My reading of both strips by Oravecz was originally published in Hungarian in “Vizuális világgalokotás.”

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