

A semiotic approach to comics and (cultural) translation

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Federico Zanettin (ed.), *Comics in Translation*. Oxon: Routledge, 2014, 322 pp., \$60.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-905763-07-8.

A second edition of *Comics in Translation* has appeared six years after the first. It is still as topical as it was. Though structured as a sober textbook for the (advanced) classroom, with four chapters on general theoretical aspects of comics in translation preceding eight case studies, it offers a delightful, even suspenseful, reading experience.

The field is generally held to be “emergent” or at best “newly established”. However, Zanettin’s opening Overview (pp. 1-32), a concise essay on “comics in translation”, as well as his closing Annotated Bibliography of no less than 149 titles of books and articles (pp. 270-306) provide secure proof that self-sufficiency, precision, broadness of perspective, as well as analytical clarity have already been gained. His introduction covers a lot of ground in response to the double question: *What does translation tell us about comics and what do comics tell us about translation? What are comics and what is translation after we have answered the first question?* Translation scholars and practitioners who are not necessarily great fans of comics are familiarized with the basic genres, taxonomies and concepts that are useful when dealing with comics, cartoons and graphic novels. Comics scholars and aficionados are treated to a comprehensible, lucid critical introduction to the semiotics of translation, its themes, research insights and levels of inquiry. Hard to ask for more.

Understanding comics in translation has changed a lot since Joseph H. Matluck write in the 1960s, about Mexican publications of US comic strips that ‘as in all countries where translated material has come from the United States, a too careless selection of translators or good translators too busy to devote the necessary time to paraphrasing carefully and natively, has resulted in the corruption of the speech habits of the barely literate group, who form a good part of the population and a better part of the comics readers and who are not well enough equipped intellectually to withstand the pressures of the written word’ (Matluck 1960: 228). For Matluck, who was quite progressive in his view that comics, and their translation, are perfectly legitimate objects of study, the perception of translated comics was merely a matter of adapting the strings of verbal language in a careful way. A translator’s carelessness could present a moral threat for the target reader, while a tasteful rendition could perhaps save them from expressing themselves in VROOMs, BLAMs and POWs: In any case, “americanization”, the flooding of global markets with American comics, was an affair of words only.

Today, most would agree that comics translation is more than ‘constrained’, that it is more than translation where ‘natural [verbal] languages are the only “systems” which are affected by translation’. It is acknowledged that comics translations must consider ‘visual and/or auditory channels in addition to the verbal channel of communication’ (Zanettin 2014: 20-21). Preparing manga for distribution in Germany or Disney cartoons for the Arabic market, entails a change of genre, readership and publication format. This kind of translation is intersemiotic, rather than merely inter-linguistic (if indeed there is such a thing as a purely and properly inter-linguistic translation). This argument is illuminated by the case studies included in Zanettin’s volume; drawn from different parts of the globe, they stay

clear from considering translation as a question of verbal equivalence or that 'visual' languages are somehow universal. Yet, the most important contribution of this volume is its insistence on medium and genre specificity: Intersemiosis (a series of adaptations of the source image/text/object into other media and languages) in translating comics is *much more crucial* than in translating other kinds (types, genres, media) of literature and art. Informed definitions of translation (going beyond, but grounded in inter-linguistic, *proper* examples) are applied to the history, the socio-cultural background and the current state of the comics market so fluently, that they encourage the reader to forget that medium-specific awareness combined with a functional understanding of intersemiosis in cultural translation (translation at large) have not always been self-explanatory.

The chapters on the general aspects of comics in translation enhance Zanettin's compelling idea that comics studies and translation studies cross-illuminate one-another in exemplary ways. Nadine Celotti deals with the verbal loci of translation in comics (balloons, titles, captions, paratext) in a relationship of tension with the 'meaning-making function of the visual message' (47). Valerio Rota examines the four main publication formats for comics, typical of the American, French, Italian and Japanese industries, to show that size, proportion and characteristics, when modified, will change the whole cultural context of the reception of comics. He argues against 'drastic adaptations aimed at hiding their origin', in favor of translation as 'tangible proof of [what Antoine Berman has called] the "experience of the foreign"', involving 'the recognition of, and respect for other cultures' (96). Heike Elisabeth Jüngst, in describing the gradually increasing 'Japaneseness' of manga translations in Germany, highlights another dimension of recognizing alterity and (linguistic/aesthetic) origin in comics translation: Today, readers 'like their manga to look as Japanese as possible' (74), and indeed this need for exoticism as part of the seduction of manga results in 'the translation tr[ying] to look more Japanese than the original' (ibid).

Tension rises here. Juxtaposing Rota's call for an ethical translation that respects cultural otherness and Jüngst's study of the growing trend for authenticity in translation, one is confronted with certain elementary questions regarding the semiotics of culture and the politics of communication: Does 'respecting' another culture coincide, or overlap with 'exoticizing' it? Does seeing the other as exotic automatically mean treating them as inferior? Does enjoying something for its (apparent) originality and authenticity, i.e. because it is foreign and strange to us, automatically create an asymmetrical cultural relationship?

I would argue that, while the paradigm of exoticism has been forged within a broader context of an objectifying and superior attitude of the dominant West towards other cultures (what has been called the 'colonizing gaze', but in fact it is a whole worldview underpinning technologies of war and devaluation), appreciating foreignness, authenticity, historicity, wonder and other characteristics that comprise the category of the exotic does not necessarily presuppose or endorse a self-conception of supremacy and dominance. Most primitivist modern art, certain scientific and experimental practices, and all good comics, are proof of that. So does exoticism rule out respect? It depends.

A thoroughly researched and ambitious book is bound to show up the very difficulties of devising workable models and generalizations of the translateability of semiotic systems such as verbal language, pictures and (all kinds of) media, genres and formats with reference to globalization. While Zanettin's text on 'Three Italian Translations of *La piste des Navajos*' convincingly argues for the relevance of the concept of [corporate product] 'localization' (as defined by the Localization Industry Standards Association) when examining the translation of widely distributed comics, we still have to understand translation strategies, (the 'localizing' one and its *others*, whether they aim to foreignize, aestheticize, stylize or to simplify the target product) more as a continuum, and less as equivalent cultural stakes in competition with one another. Competition implies the possibility of either one winning over the other, and in the cases of translation, the local has no chance of prevailing, unless it is itself the strategy of the global. 'Globalization' is always an asymmetrical power relationship. Part

of its sweeping force is exactly its structural ability to discover, appreciate the local, coopt isolated aspects of the local, and embody them within its own repertoire.

Discussing the globalization of French croissants and Mexican cuisine through an initial selection process in the USA, Goran Sonesson offers an exemplary formulation of this problem from the point of view of cultural semiotics: '[W]e really received [cultural] messages of a kind from other countries [France and Mexico]: but only one country, the United States, has at the moment the power to put those messages into circulation, and it does not do it without deforming them by means of its own code' (Sonesson 2004: 165).

Taking this condition (of localization as part of the strategy of globalization) into account, it is hard to fully subscribe to the main argument in Elena di Giovanni's essay on 'The Winx as a Challenge to Globalization' (220-236). The translation of the (Italian) Winx Club into English can hardly be seen as 'resisting the globalizing corporate strategies' on the grounds that the production managers supervise all English translations. Instead, the local (Italian) language should be understood as one of the attributes of the corporate product (however important an attribute it may be). The verbal language system in this case definitely enables the direct comprehensibility and thus consumability of the product in certain markets, yet it is no less important than packaging or other aspects of formatting and publication (what Zanettin would call the 'parameters of localization'). In other words, the use of a specific marketing method by the corporate managers of the (Italian) Winx Club cannot be seen as a sign of victory, or resistance of the 'local' language against the dominant 'global' English. It is an intrinsic part of the product's branding. In other words, nowadays, a national language can be part of the 'world creation' strategy of corporate products, i.e. only one of the rhetorical, aesthetic, stylistic and narrative elements that pervade, as constant and instantly recognizable features, all the ads, comics, dolls, clothes, and other merchandise related to a mass cultural commodity. This is confirmed not only in the conclusions drawn by Jüngst about the increasing Japaneseness of manga translations in Germany mentioned above, but notably also in the study, by Raffaella Baccolini and Federico Zanettin, of the translations of Spiegelman's *Maus*: The uneasy, at times marginally failing translations of an already complex narrative, where Vladek, the author's father, 'tell[s] of trauma without making sense of the Holocaust' (99) using broken English with yiddish elements 'further testify to the crisis in representation and language that often follows trauma' (128), and, I would add, point to the innate and inescapable historical and cultural hierarchies of verbal (and other) codes.

Having said that, di Giovanni's essay, to her credit, attempts to position the field of comics and translation in media theory and studies of mass communication. The future of this field lies, I believe, exactly in this approach of comics as a medium of mass communication and of cultural translation as a terrain of asymmetrical and antagonistic acts of communication operating within, and heavily determined by a material technological apparatus and a nexus of political realities.

Pressing matters of cultural semiotics aside, several noteworthy empirical observations are made in this compilation. Certain long-held assumptions about translation and comics are confirmed, for instance, that translations of low-brow comics are more target-oriented, while translations of high-brow comics tend to be more source-oriented, i.e. interested in achieving a certain equivalence to the author's style rather than appealing to the readers' expectations and pool of knowledge. Others are challenged. It seems that the internet has not affected comics production and consumption (through, for instance, the possibility of hypertextual links and scroll-down) as much as had been predicted by important scholars such as Scott McCloud and Mario Saraceni, and 'print has remained the main form of publication for comics' (9).

Comics in Translation has created a precedent. Conferences and articles have had to draw on its material and themes. Klaus Kaindl's dense and erudite summary entitled 'Comics in Translation' for the *Handbook of Translation* (Kaindl 2010) amply quotes articles from *Comics in Translation*. Nathalie Mälzer's *Comics – Übersetzungen und Adaptionen*, an edited collection of contributions to a

conference on 'The Translation and Adaptation of Comics' (Hildesheim, 31 October–2 November 2014), follows up on questions posed by Kaindl (keynote speaker at the conference) and by authors in Zanettin's book. Next to a series of engaging texts on the adaptation (as comics) of literary works (Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Robert Musil's *Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Dante's *Commedia Divina*, Arthur Rimbaud's poems), Mälzer's volume offers many contributions that discuss linguistic translation techniques and strategies in relation to the global/local, familiarizing/foreignizing trajectories, as well as theorize and apply broader definitions of translation, definitions that address issues of medium-specific aspects of communication, the taxonomy of genres and questions relating to modes of address and semiotic language systems (pictorial, verbal, and formal).

Since the 1990s, there seems to be a (relatively) common route followed by comics and translation studies in anglophone, francophone, Spanish- and German-speaking scholarship. This 'collaborative' growth is partly due to the youth of the field: A significant part of the discussion is online and not impossible to master. This allows for smooth cross-referencing, continuity, and work that obliges with both depth and detail. This book is a great contribution to this kind of ethos, that only a combination of fan and scholar would care preserve.

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