

# Isotopy as a tool for the analysis of comics in translation: The Italian ‘rip-off’ of Gilbert Shelton’s *Freak Brothers*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines a corpus of selected Italian translations of Gilbert Shelton’s underground comic strip *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* (initially collected in 13 issues by Rip Off Press, 1971–1997) using isotopies as a key tool in the analysis of comics in translation. After discussing the role and potential applications of isotopies (cf. Bertrand 2000; Greimas 1966b; Rastier 1972; Greimas and Courtés 1979), we argue that the act of translating comics inherently entails the selection, magnification, narcotization, and even erasure of the isotopies of the source text as well as the creation of new ones belonging exclusively to the target culture. Subsequently, Shelton’s works are analyzed as an example of politically-committed, subversive social satire, which can be considered the epitome of the 1960–70s’ US-countercultural zeitgeist. In Italy, Shelton’s comic strips received multiple translations from both alternative, militant publishers (Arcana and Stampa Alternativa) and mainstream houses (Mondadori and Comicon) at different times (from Arcana’s early anthology in 1974 to Comicon’s latest issue in 2019). This allows for a diachronic comparison of multiple translations of the same comics, each showing the signs of changing translational approaches, editorial policies, and target audiences. Finally, the contrastive analysis of original works and translations may provide insight into the negotiation and communication of cultural, social, and political identities through the medium of comics. In this respect, we employ a semiotic approach that disentangles the ideological and culture-bound premises and the hermeneutic frames that intervene in the process of translating comics of such deep (counter-)cultural value as Shelton’s *Freak Brothers*.

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## 1. Introduction

Since its early manifestations, the history of the comic medium has been closely connected with social and political narratives – suffice to mention the grandfather of all comics, *The Yellow Kid*, created by Richard F. Outcault as early as 1895. Comics have been a mirror and a multimodal narrator for changing cultural models, both influenced by and influencing their sociocultural environments. In this respect, translation has always been at the core of comics development and spread.

Zanettin (2018) maintained that, since the early nineteenth-century (proto)comics, translation had played a significant role in shaping the different cultures and traditions of the comic medium worldwide. The translation of comics favored the circulation of imageries and conventions, thus contributing to the contamination between national schools such as U.S. comics, French BDs, Italian *fumetti*, Spanish *tebeos/historietas*, and Japanese *manga*.

In reflecting on how translation processes partake in the negotiation and communication of cultural, social, and political identities through the comics medium, we employ the semiotic notion of isotopy, first postulated by Greimas (1966a, 1966b). After introducing this analysis tool (Section 2), we explore comics translation studies and discuss how isotopies may adapt to this field of investigation (Section 3). Next, we apply isotopic analysis to the Italian translations of Gilbert Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* (1971–1997) (Section 4) to substantiate this. Shelton's comics exemplify politically-committed works, imbued with the 1960–70s' U.S. *countercultural* values and themes. These were translated and adapted to an utterly different Italian context and by various publishers at other times. Whether used as a militant flag by Italian radicals or canonized as icons of the 'Fabled Sixties' by mainstream publications, the adventures of Shelton's *fabulous* trio enable a diachronic study of the evolution of the isotopic pathways taken throughout the translation process. By following these pathways, we highlight how the application of isotopic analysis to comics translations may unveil the signs of changing ideologies and translational approaches, editorial policies, and target audiences.

## 2. Isotopies and comics: An introduction

According to Greimas (1966a, 1966b),<sup>1</sup> *isotopy* refers to the iteration of units of signification (or *semes*) throughout a text or discourse, which guarantees semantic cohesion and homogeneity. Greimas argued that, before their actualization, lexemes are polysemous by their very nature. Whenever a lexeme is actualized in a discourse, a potentially different *sememe*, i.e., a manifestation of sense, is produced by combining different

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<sup>1</sup> On isotopies, see also Rastier (1972), Klinkenberg (1973) and Groupe  $\mu$  (1976).

semes. Thus, sememes change according to texts and communication contexts. Greimas distinguished between two types of semes: nuclear semes are invariable, permanent, specific, and context-independent; classemes are variable, contextual, and generic. While nuclear semes are always part of the sememe, the classemes are either present or absent, depending on the context. Each time a seme is reiterated, it becomes more redundant, and the level of intelligibility and disambiguation increases. Such semantic redundancy is called isotopy.

Isotopies are thus conceived of creations starting from the basic units of signification, the semes, through to their cumulation, concatenation, and hierarchization. The coherence relationship among such semic elements constitutes the deep semantic structure of texts (cf. van Dijk 1972). In this context, the isotopies inhabiting a text can act as maps or gravitational centers (cf. Binelli 2013) that guide the process of interpretation of such discursive manifestations.

The isotopic analysis focuses not only on single terms but also on their relation and recurrence within discourse as a whole, including its figures (actors, time, space) and their thematization (cf. Bertrand 2000). Greimas and Courtés argued (1979) that figures acquire sense when they are thematized in the context of a more general and abstract interpretive framework. Thus, thematic isotopies result from a hermeneutic act where figures are correlated and provided with a narrative value. At the same time, content is explored on a deeper level, beyond the surface of the text, often based on a predetermined reading level (e.g., religious, Catholic, political, Marxist, artistic, Expressionist, Freudian, etc.).

The selection of figures and their association to a theme depends on adopting a given hermeneutic frame. According to the influential theories by Minsky (1980) and Fillmore (1976), frames guide knowledge representations and reasoning schemes – functioning like Eco's (1976) encyclopedic knowledge. Encountering a new situation, we categorize it drawing from our personal 'memory boxes' a predetermined structure derived from semantic networks and experiences stored in our memory. Thanks to such intertextual scripts, a text is positioned within a given context and frame and interpreted accordingly.

Such a hermeneutic process entails a selection of the isotopic nuclei to trace. Indeed, polysemic terms and other items may also participate in different isotopies (shifters or *embrayeurs*), and, given the multiplicity of isotopies within a text, hierarchies of isotopies may exist (cf. Greimas and Courtés 1979). To discern dominant isotopies, qualitative and quantitative analyses are required. For instance, we might look for relevant sememes in salient positions, such as a text's beginning or conclusion (cf. Eco 1979:91), or classemes recurring in many sememes (cf. Arrivé 1973; van Dijk 1972). Choosing the dominant isotopies is crucial as this influences the text's thematization and final interpretation.

In translation, such processes of selection and hierarchization, as well as the choice of the context in which a given sememe expresses its full potential and highlights the corresponding isotopies, may result in the “magnification” or the “narcotization” of semantic elements (Eco 2003:139). For example, some secondary isotopies may become dominant, while other dominant isotopies may be downgraded; some isotopies may be added and others erased. Just as for the author of a text, the creation of isotopies may be conscious or unconscious; the choice to translate them may be deliberate or not. In some cases, misunderstanding specific polysemous terms or the lack of certain classemes within the target language and culture may account for the loss of a given isotopy. Some choices may respond to the belief that the receiving audience prefers some themes and cannot recognize others because of a lack of familiarity. In several cases, the selection of isotopies is inherently ideological, just as the choices that orient the hermeneutic reading of a given text.

As a semiotic category and not merely a verbal one, isotopy can be applied to the analysis of all codes and proves a highly effective tool when working on case studies in different fields (cinema, theater, and advertising, among others). Here, we apply isotopy to comics translation as a peculiar hermeneutic process involving the passage to another visual culture and comics tradition. In this respect, the following subsection provides a brief account of comics translation studies in which isotopy may prove a valuable analysis tool.

### 3. Comics and translation: A state of the art

Although comics represent a high-volume translation segment (cf. D’Arcangelo and Zanettin 2004; Rota 2003; Zanettin 2008b, 2018), comics remain an under-investigated topic within translation studies. Only one notable monograph in German (i.e., Kaindl 2004a) and a few collected volumes (e.g., Mälzer 2015; Zanettin 2008a) are devoted to the topic.

According to Kaindl (1999, 2004b), comics studies have long suffered from methodological problems as monomodal disciplines traditionally segment comics and investigate single components, thus overlooking their whole. D’Arcangelo and Zanettin (2004) argue that traditionally research on comics translation almost exclusively looked at U.S. comic strips (e.g., *Calvin and Hobbes* and Disney comics) and Franco-Belgian works (e.g., *Astérix* and *Tintin*) focusing on specific verbal problems (e.g., humor, puns, metaphors, onomatopoeias, proper names, interjections). The aim was to establish normative guidelines for comics translation, which only rarely included consideration of the interaction between words and images, the editorial dimension of the comics industry, and the sociocultural context in which these

works were produced and exported. Comics were also investigated as a form of 'constrained' translation (e.g., Grun and Dollerup 2003) since panels and speech balloons represent a limit to the possibilities of the translator from a spatial viewpoint. Images were either disregarded or considered a universal code, shared by the source and target cultures, imposing further limitations to the verbal component (e.g., Rabadàn 1991). Finally, Celotti (2008) contested the notion of constrained translation in comics and argued that the translator of comics should be a "semiotic investigator" (47) who is conscious of the word/image interdependence.

Semiotics pioneered the appreciation of the comics' potential as a medium. As early as 1964, Umberto Eco laid the foundation for an integrated study of the language of comics in some of the essays collected in his seminal *Apocalittici e Integrati*. Other pioneering semiotic investigations followed dealing with the syncretism of comics, i.e., the emergence of sense through the interplay of verbal and pictorial elements (cf., for example, Barbieri 1991, 2017; Floch 1997; Fresnault-Deruelle 1972; Groensteen 1999, 2011; Peeters 1991, 1993). In this respect, the influential works by comic authors and scholars Will Eisner (1985) and Scott McCloud (1993) also relied on a solid semiotic approach.

In recent years, several studies also emphasized how comics translation may entail a change in publication format (page size, layout, panel arrangement, reading direction, color/black and white), genre, readership, form of production, and distribution according to country-specific and culture-bound conventions (e.g., Ficarra 2012; Gonsalves de Assis 2015; Jüngst 2008; Kaindl 2010; Rota 2008; Zanettin 2008a, 2014). In this respect, the study of comics translation can effectively support the analysis of how cultural and political identities and ideologies are constructed, negotiated, and communicated by comics. For example, Brems (2013) used different translations of Hergé's *Quick & Flupke* comic strips to pinpoint economic, cultural, and political factors informing the francophone and the Flemish Belgian identities. Likewise, Mohamed (2016) reflected on the self-translation of her webcomic *Qahera* from English into Arabic, showing the transformations that the original work underwent to adapt the adventures of her Muslim superheroine who was fighting against Islamophobia and misogyny to a different culture and audience.

Other studies explored the history of comics translation by focusing, for instance, on the role of publishers and other mediators such as Zanettin (2017) on the Italian Lotario or Balteiro (2010) and Valencia-Garcia (2012) on the Spanish *Hispano Americana de Ediciones*. Zanettin (2017, 2018) investigated how comics' translation often entails processes of explicit, institutional censorship (e.g., under dictatorships such as Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Fascist Italy, Francoist Spain) and self-censorship motivated by religious, moral, economic, ideological, and political reasons; for example, the infamous Comics Code Authority established in 1954 by the U.S. comics industry itself.



Figure 1. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1969 (2008:61), panel 13.

Thus, when dealing with the study of comics translation, it is imperative to adopt a more integrated approach that cuts across verbal communication and encompasses both a sociocultural and a semiotic stance. Research on such media as comics and cartoons benefited from the increasing interest in visual communication and multimodality (cf., for example, Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014; Davies 2019; Polli and Berti 2020; Tsakona 2009), marking a shift from investigations on language and grammar to graphic-oriented inquiries into the *ninth art*.

Made popular by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006), the study of multimodality recently gained a foothold in several fields, advancing the premise that communication is formed by a multimodal ensemble whereby meanings are conveyed through a combination of heterogeneous semiotic resources (images, gesture, posture, and so on). Just as in language, these resources are shaped through historical, social, and cultural contexts of use – against any claim of universalistic codes.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) elaborated their visual grammar on the premise that images are organized according to specific forms and structures. In a multimodal text, visual elements are connected to but not dependent on verbal ones in meaning construction. This is consistent with Celotti's (2008) definition of comics diegesis, which is generated by "the simultaneity of the visual and the verbal languages" (34). In this context, many studies adopted a multimodal approach in analyzing comics translation (cf., e.g., Borodo 2015; Kaindl 2004b; Weissbrod and Kohm 2015; Yuste Frías 2011).

The present article aims to join the ranks of studies adopting a more holistic approach to the investigation of comics by using a structuralist concept of isotopies as a critical instrument to carry out a comparative analysis of comics in translation. In comics, isotopies can be – and often are – the outcome of semantic coherence among verbal and visual elements, which share some relevant classemes and suggest a homogeneous understanding of these syncretic texts.

A brief example of such interplay can be found in Figure 1, taken from one of Shelton's (2008:61) *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* strips, initially published in 1969. The panel shows a man with a porcine face revealed to be an undercover agent in the story. Here, he is tied up inside a car trunk, displaying the writing "Death to Pigs." In this panel, the isotopy of animality is created by the redundancy of the classeme 'animality' in visual (the porcine, chubby face of the policeman with a snout and a feral mouth) and verbal items (the sememe 'Pigs' in the slogan "Death to Pigs"). In this respect, the isotopy of animality comes to define – and dehumanize – the political enemy. Such isotopy is fundamental to understanding Shelton's strip. During the 1960s–70s U.S. counterculture, the derogatory term 'pig' was often used



Figure 2. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1971 (2008:86), panels 4-9.

to refer to police officers. As a member of this countercultural milieu, Sheldon adds slogans such as 'Death to Pigs' in his strips and frequently portrays police officers as pigs (Figure 2).

The effective interpretation of such panels and their subversive message requires (1) recognizing the words/images interplay and (2) adopting a specific – in this case, political – frame. However, as the following subsection demonstrates, this is not always the case. For example, word-image interplay may be misread or purposefully used to modify the original material and engender new signification processes. In addition, when translating a text, different hermeneutic frames may come into play. As the next section shows, isotopic analysis proves helpful to look at how the original (counter)culture-bound materials can be modified and even 'ripped off' in translation.

#### 4. Gilbert Shelton's translations: A case of italian Rip-Off?

Gilbert Shelton is often credited as the most politically effective cartoonist among the handful of artists that gave life to the underground comix phenomenon (cf. Danky and Kitchen 2009; Estren 1974; Rosenkranz 2002; Skinn 2004), which boomed during the

U.S. 1960s–70s counterculture.<sup>2</sup> Although differing in style and quality, underground authors shared a desire to revolutionize the comics medium, pushing the boundaries of freedom of expression to challenge authorities, 'square' society's dogmas, and the grip of (self-)censorship which had bent U.S. comic industry since 1954.<sup>3</sup>

Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* (hereafter *TFFFB*)<sup>4</sup> strips, first published in *The Rag* in May 1968 and then re-issued by Rip Off Press, represent one of the most prominent examples of a successful marriage between witty satire, radical politics, and underground comix. In *TFFFB*, the dope-addled adventures of three freaks – Free-wheelin' Franklin, Phineas, and Fat Freddy – serve as a device to narrate a world of squatters, student protests, and brawls with the police from an endogenous position. Far from any stereotypical hippie ideal, the three freaks expressed a sort of anarchic insurrectionism and its intransigent and refractory attitude towards the establishment.

*TFFFB*'s strips were (and still are) among the most acclaimed and widely translated underground comix because of their successful blending of witticism and apparent flippancy. In Italy, at first, *TFFFB* stories were published exclusively by alternative and independent publishers, namely Arcana Press (1974) and Stampa Alternativa. The latter dedicated seven volumes (published between 1981 and 1998) to the three brothers, not counting the reprints. Moreover, radical activist Angelo Quattrocchi also included two stories in his magazine *Riso Amaro 1* and *Risamaro Comix*.

These publishers relied on non-professional translators who shared a common countercultural background with the author. Despite this connection, the earliest issues of *TFFFB* strips suffer from a general inconsistency in the quality of translation. The fact that Arcana's and Stampa Alternativa's anthologies included works by different translators and editors with varying degrees of expertise and sensibilities is evident as the style changes from volume to volume and strip to strip. Frequent cases of faulty pagination (e.g., in Stampa Alternativa's issue *Odissea Mexicana* page 2 and 7 are inverted, and page 21 is printed back to front), omissions, extreme condensation, and the qualitative impoverishment of the original stylistic and linguistic complexity are essentially the outcome of translators 'and editors' negligence and incompetence. All these are accompanied with an extreme form of domestication (cf. Venuti 1995) of textual elements such as toponyms ('Council Bluffs' in Iowa becomes 'Roccasecca'), proper names ('Fat Freddy' is intermittently called 'Fat Freddie,' 'Ciccio Freddie,' 'Freddy Lardo,' 'Freddie Lardo,' 'Freddi,' and 'Freddie,' even within the same strip), and regionalisms (Arcana's and Stampa Alternativa's anthologies frequently use expressions from Milan's and Rome's dialect, respectively).

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<sup>2</sup>For a historical overview of the counterculture and the Sixties, cf. Gitlin (1993) and Anderson (1995).

<sup>3</sup>On the U.S. Comic Code Authority and (self)censorship, cf. Hajdu (2008).

<sup>4</sup>Knockabout Comics collected all of *TFFFB*'s stories mentioned in this paper in the volume *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Omnibus* (2008). Hereafter, page numbers of original texts refer to this volume.

For decades Shelton's *Freak Brothers* remained exclusive to the Italian independent circuit, except for two comic strips included in the newsstand magazines *Totem Comic* (March 1988) and *Totem* (September 1998). However, the largest Italian publisher, Mondadori, recently decided to publish an anthology dedicated to the trio. The volume *Gilbert Shelton. Freak Brothers* (2009) was part of the collection "I maestri del fumetto" ('Masters of Comics') and included an introductory essay by prominent Italian comics scholar Daniele Barbieri. This interest in Shelton's comics would have been unthinkable back in the 1960s and pointed to Shelton's full canonization as a master of the comic art, which is also evident in the light of Comicon's subsequent choice to include *TFFFB* in the series *I fondamentali*, issuing three volumes in 2014, 2016, and 2019. Comicon aimed to provide a philologically accurate translation work, even adding an appendix to explain several cultural gaps that seemed untranslatable into Italian or hard to understand.

Besides the considerations regarding the varying quality of Shelton's Italian translations, it is interesting to note how significantly the selection of strips in each collection differs, reflecting different times and audiences. For example, anthologies by militant publishers such as Arcana and Stampa Alternativa are imbued with the turmoil of the Italian *Anni di Piombo* (literally, 'Years of Lead,' meaning the late 1960s up to the early 1980s).<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that these publishing houses chose to translate Shelton's most subversive, politically committed adventures that hailed directly from the counterculture years (the mid-1960s to 1970s), aiming to reach an audience within the Italian underground milieu.

Conversely, Mondadori did not translate the strips belonging to the first, more radical phase of Shelton's work and focused instead on his subsequent production. However, commercial considerations may have dictated this choice, given the success of picaresque stories such as *Idiots Abroad* (issued initially between the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s) and the desire to present Shelton as a canonized author to a broader target audience. Likewise, in the case of Comicon, although a selection of Shelton's early comic strips is included in the 2016 volume (146-193), post-counterculture works from the late 1970s onwards clearly outnumber them.

Still, it is possible to compare two or more translations of the same stories in several cases. As the following examples highlight, this comparison enables us to show how this a priori selection of contents connects to a change of frames adopted in the interpretation of Shelton's works, leading to processes of narcotization and magnification of the original isotopies. We will examine, in particular, four excerpts from Shelton's strips, focusing on the translation of such themes as the overt antagonism towards the police (4.1), humorous (4.2) as well as politically charged contents (4.3)

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the Italian political situation during the 'Years of Lead,' see Lazar and Matard-Bonucci (2010).

and profanity (4.4). Finally, the Italian translations of the panels selected are compared with regards to changes that occurred on a semic level as well as to the different approaches and ideological premises that may have influenced certain choices.

#### 4.1 "Those Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Acquire a Groupie"

The 1969 four-page story "Those Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Acquire a Groupie" (6-9 in original; 56-59 in *Arcana*; 148-151 in *Comicon*) invites a contrastive analysis between the translations of *Arcana*'s very first anthology dedicated to the trio and one of the latest, by *Comicon* in 2016. The story revolves around the encounter of the trio of squatters with a teenage drop-out girl who wants to join their group. The girl's arrival breaks the brothers' routine. Her behavior clashes with the trio's habits provoking a series of humorous gags, while her gullibility leads an undercover narcotics agent, the recurring character Norbert the Nark, into the house. Figure 3 shows the panel in which, once exposed, the three freaks defenestrate the policeman. Viewers see the trio's arms sticking out of the window and Norbert's body falling while the freaks exclaim in chorus: "It's Norbert the nark! Time for Norbert's flyin' lesson!" (8).

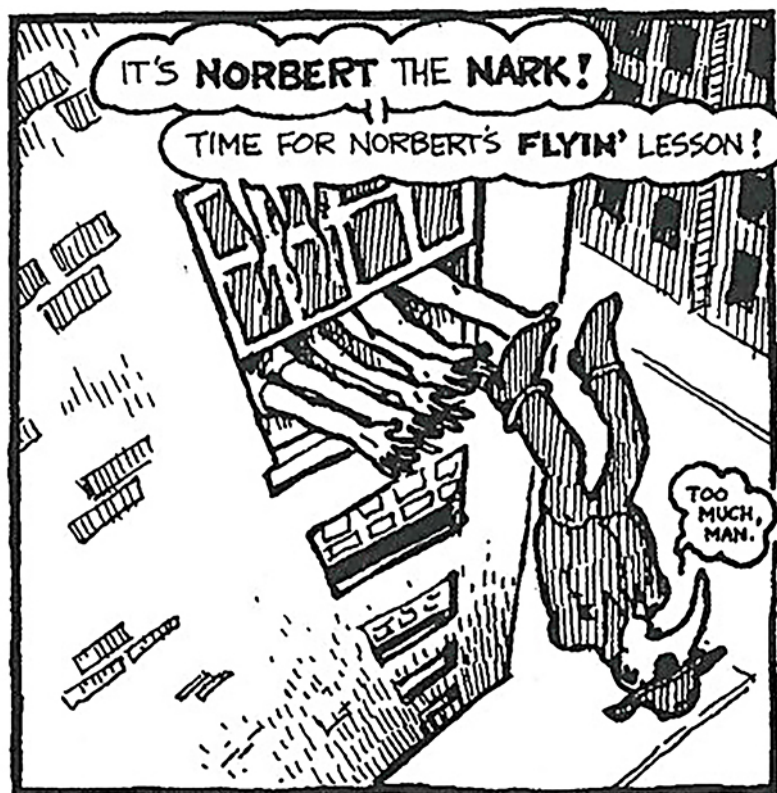


Figure 3. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1969 (2008: 8), panel 6.

The isotopy of flight is created by the redundancy of the repeated, corresponding classeme ‘flight,’ which is verbally conveyed by the sememe ‘flying,’ the figure of Norbert’s falling body, and the vertical construction of the scene, which uses a high angle shot to emphasize the height of the building the body is thrown out of.

Such perspective also informs about power dynamics, as viewers gaze at the policeman’s falling in a top-down movement. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006:140), “if a represented participant is seen from a high angle, then the relation between the interactive participants (the producers of the image and hence also the viewer) and the represented participant is depicted as one in which the interactive participant has power over the represented participant – the represented participant is seen from a point of view of power.” In this light, the author and his readers (i.e., the ‘interactive participants’) have power over Norbert (i.e., the ‘represented participant’), who finds himself in a vulnerable position. This is consistent with the countercultural desire to subvert power relations and demean all forms of authority, particularly police forces.

In the original, the classeme ‘learning’ is also present as the defenestration act is ironically called “flyin’ lesson” by the three brothers. By connotation, the term ‘lesson’ may indicate how Norbert is learning not to mess with the trio.

Table 1 shows how Arcana’s translation, influenced by Italy’s ‘Years of Lead’ (anni di piombo), led to a (counter)cultural adaptation of the source text. Indeed, in addition to changing the proper name of the policeman (i.e., ‘Norbert’ becomes ‘Esposito’), which may be an inside joke incomprehensible today or an opaque reference to a real-life person, a comparison with anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli is established.

Along with other anarchists, railroad worker Giuseppe Pinelli was suspected of being involved in the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan on December 12, 1969, causing the death of seventeen people and injuring eighty-eight. While being held in custody for questioning for more than forty-eight hours (i.e., more than the time normally allowed for detention without a charge), he fell to his death from a fourth-floor window

Table 1. Norbert’s Fall in Translation<sup>6</sup>

Original (8)	Arcana (58)	Comicon (150)
“It’s <i>Norbert</i> the <i>nark</i> ! Time for Norbert’s <i>flyin’</i> lesson!”	“È Esposito della <i>Narco</i> ! Lo facciamo volare come Pinelli!” (Literally: ‘It’s Esposito from the Narcs! We make him fly like Pinelli!’)	“ <i>Norbert</i> della <i>Narcotici</i> ! È ora della sua lezione di <i>volo</i> !” (Literally: ‘It’s time for his flying lesson!’)

<sup>6</sup> Bold font is used for emphasis in the original, represented here in italics.

of the Milan police station on December 15. Policemen first claimed that he had died due to a suicide attempt, but they soon retracted, and the case was filed as an accidental death. The Piazza Fontana bombing, planned by the neo-fascist group Ordine Nuovo, marked the beginning of the 'Years of Lead.' At the same time, the mysteries and lies regarding Pinelli's death and the role of law enforcement officers in the supposed accident became the topic of debates and protests of radical extra-parliamentary groups.

Arcana published Shelton's anthology in 1974, at a time dominated by debates regarding Pinelli's death and the climate of guerrilla warfare between authorities and extra-parliamentary groups. The adopted hermeneutic frame is overtly influenced by the resultant cultural turmoil, which reverberates in the choice to manipulate Shelton's original lines. The isotopy of flight is crucial, as it triggers a simile with Pinelli's death. In this, the translator likely saw an opportunity to reverse Italian political events: this time, it is a policeman who is thrown out of a window by counterculture members. In this respect, Shelton's use of perspective also reinforces the overturning of power relations as the panel shows a policeman being overpowered.

On a connotative level, the balloon also implies that the trio *makes* Norbert fly ("Lo facciamo volare come..."), just as somebody else *made* Pinelli fly. The translator is expressing a strong personal opinion widely shared within the Italian underground milieu, likely including Arcana's readers who certainly recognized the simile and endorsed its assumption. In Italian, the *classeme* 'learning' is not included as this is not a flying lesson but rather a political act of virtual retaliation. Conversely, we have the addition of the *classeme* 'coercion' (in the *sememe* 'facciamolo') and 'anarchy' (in the *sememe* "Pinelli").

Comicon's version of the same passage follows the source text without cultural adaptation. Arcana's domestication policy is now obsolete in translation practice (Cavagnoli 2010). Besides betraying an evident lack of professionalism, it was also the by-product of the prominent role that comix took on as a means to transmit countercultural thought, experience, and values. The ideology-based cultural adaptation of the American experience into the Italian context was plausible for the translator, who perceived a contact point between the two incidents. On these premises, the translator re-coded the foreign text in a hermeneutic frame which may no longer be so intuitive for 2010s Comicon's readership after almost fifty years and a drastic change in cultural and ideological references. In this respect, while the antagonism towards the police shines through the pages of the first militant translations, mainstream publications display a somewhat neutral position towards law enforcement. These stances are reflected in opposite approaches towards the seditious and irreverent anti-police argot of the *Freak Brothers*.

The example included in Section 3 showed how policemen were often called 'pigs,' which Arcana's and *Stampa Alternativa*'s translations often kept in English (even as a part of slurs, such as 'Fuck you pig!', 'Kill pigs,' 'Off the pigs,' 'Death to pigs'). This

indicates the widespread use of this derogatory term among the target readership. Its understanding may also be supported by the presence of the images showing police officers with chubby faces and stylized snouts, resembling actual pigs (for example, in Figures 1 and 2, translated on page 1 of *Stampa Alternativa's L'Erba del Vicino* and page 41 of *Arcana*, respectively).

No mainstream volume included stories referring to police officers by such slurs. Therefore, one cannot compare this key term between mainstream and alternative publications. However, two opposite trends are notable in the adaptation of such terms as 'cop' and 'bust.' In Italian militant publications, the noun 'bust' is translated as 'perquisa,' a contraction of 'perquisizione,' widely employed as a slang term by Italian radical Leftists. Alternative publishers treated 'perquisa' as a keyword referring to the 'enemy.' Even in English, the very concept of 'bust' is crucial to understanding *TFFFB's* narrative, as it represents the moment of a clash between counterculture and establishment framed in the 'Us vs. Them' logic which defined the whole countercultural movement.

As for the term 'cop,' militant publishers' anthologies domesticate this noun into the radical Leftists' slang term 'pulotto,' a (counter)culturally connoted nickname used within the anti-establishment Italian milieu and easily understood by its supporters. This noun is frequently used in *Arcana's* anthology to refer to policemen, while *Stampa Alternativa's* and *Riso Amaro's* translations sometimes alternate it with the slang term 'pula.'

Such terms as 'bust' and 'cop' in English, or 'perquisa,' 'pulotto,' and 'pula' in Italian, perform a societal function by forming a sort of private code which acts as an emblem of belonging for the members of a given group (cf. Coleman 2012). They all share the *classeme* 'dissidence,' which is entirely lost in most recent translations. When translating these terms from Shelton's original texts, both Mondadori and Comicon adopted more neutral solutions such as 'poliziotto' and 'retata,' which are regularly used in today's subcultural context and by everybody outside that context, including the police itself. In this respect, they convey neither a sense of exclusiveness, of *belonging* to a given subgroup, nor a seditious undertone.

Moreover, in the most recent publication by Comicon (2019), besides 'poliziotto,' the term 'cop' is translated as 'piedipiatti,' a *de facto* mocking address for the police, though one borrowed from noir and comedy and not from Italian countercultural slang. No radical would call a policeman 'piedipiatti' since it is a term connoted within the same comical frame of films like Carlo Vanzina's homonymous *Piedipiatti* (1991). The *classeme* 'ridicule' rather than 'dissidence' is conveyed.

As the following examples illustrate, mainstream publishers' tendency towards a neutralizing approach often connects to the banalization of the original materials and the adoption of comical and trivializing hermeneutic frames.

#### 4.2 "The Parakeet that Outwitted the D.E.A."

The tendency towards magnifying Shelton's light humor is often coupled with the creation of new isotopic paths that exploit word-image interplay. An example is "The parakeet that outwitted the D.E.A." (333-348), initially published in 1977 and translated by *Riso Amaro* 1 (1979a:26-41), Mondadori (2009:115-130), and Comicon (2016:52-67).

The adventure features Fat Freddy's uncle Artie who was turned into a parakeet by his wife, Sally. Once returned to human form, the man takes his revenge: In the final panel, he explains how, while Sally was under opiates, he turned her into a chicken. Artie then offers her to the three brothers as a gift. The three translations of Artie's closing line are summarized in Table 2.

In this excerpt, Mondadori's modification of the punch line stands out. While *Riso Amaro* and Comicon's translations follow the source text, Mondadori erases the scatological joke and replaces it with a pun based on the polysemy of the noun 'pollastrella' ('chick'). In Italian, as in English, the lexeme may refer to a small hen and a beautiful but gullible woman with a clear sexist undertone.

In Mondadori's text, the sememe, also emphasized by the use of bold font, conveys the classemes 'animality,' 'female,' and 'sex.' The first two classemes are present in the original as well: 'animality' is conveyed by the sememe 'chicken,' the clucks of the hen as well as by its visual representation while the repeated use of the pronoun 'her' reiterates the classeme 'female.' Mondadori's translation magnifies this twofold isotopic pathway and adds the classeme 'sex' by exploiting the polysemy of the term to create a new pun which is absent in the source text. Aunt Sally is literally (and visually) a chicken in this double entendre. Still, she is also mocked and sexually objectified by her husband, who first deceived her and then offered her to the three brothers.

**Table 2.** The translation of Artie's punch line

Original (348)	<i>Riso Amaro</i> (41)	Mondadori (130)	Comicon (67)
" <i>Haw haw!</i> Caught her asleep from too much opium and turned her into a <i>chicken!</i> The eggs are grade <i>B</i> , but the <i>shit is pure gold!</i> "	"Ha ha! Dormiva fatta d'oppio e l'ho trasformata in gallina! Le uova sono piccole ma la sua cacca è di oro puro!" (Literally: 'The eggs are small, but her poop is pure gold!')	" <i>Hah hah!</i> L'ho beccata mentre dormiva stesa dall'oppio e l'ho trasformata in un <i>pollo!</i> Le uova sono di categoria <i>B</i> , media, ma <i>che pollastrella!</i> " (Literally: 'The eggs are of category <i>B</i> , medium, but <i>what a chick!</i> ')	" <i>Ah ah!</i> L'ho colta alla sprovvista <i>addormentata</i> dall'oppio e l'ho trasformata in <i>pollo!</i> Le uova sono appena di categoria <i>B</i> ma la <i>merda è oro puro!</i> " (Literally: 'The eggs are just category <i>B</i> , but the <i>shit is pure gold!</i> ')



Figure 4. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1977 (2009:130), panel 6.

On a visual level, Figure 4 shows how Sally's figure (in the shape of a chicken) occupies a salient position at the center of the panel. As a represented participant, she is connected to the husband and the freak trio by two vectors: one is established by Artie's hands holding her cage, the other by the gaze she exchanges with the three brothers. However, in terms of power dynamics, the brothers look down on Sally, who is in a weaker position. Moreover, Sally is also isolated by the presence of the cage in which she is imprisoned. The cage acts as a visual framing device emphasizing her segregation with respect to the other represented participants. As such, image construction conveys a sense of vulnerability and confinement of the female character, with a clear power imbalance between her and the male characters. Mondadori's double entendre further magnifies this aspect by adding a sexist exclamation and creating a pun which underlies a male chauvinist attitude. In this respect, the hermeneutic frame adopted is utterly different from the original, as Shelton's comix are devoid of sexist remarks and mock what is perceived as patriarchal legacies.

The adoption of a chauvinist hermeneutic frame to reinterpret Shelton's source text is reminiscent of the combined magnification and trivialization of Robert Crumb's comix concerning the theme of sex. In most Italian translations, they were domesticated to fit a 'commedia sexy all' italiana' frame. *TFFFB's* adventures are humorous and

arguably exemplify one of the cleverest uses of comical devices among underground comix. Yet here, Mondadori's modification seems to indicate an attempt to magnify a male-centered type of humor by adding a vaguely naughty undertone, which is absent in the original and the other translations of the same story.

### 4.3 "The Fabolous Furry Freak Brothers Go to College"

Another type of modification recurring in Shelton's comix regards vital terms charged with a political value in the original. We can find an example in the translation of "The Fabolous Furry Freak Brothers Go to College," initially published in 1969 (38-41 in original; 13-16 in Arcana; 190-194 in Comicon). In this *TFFFB*'s episode, Fat Freddy decides to join a radical college occupation on the premise that: "I'm gonna show them boojwah campus radicals just what revolution's all about!" (38). The story thematizes, at least in its premises, the real-life endogenous opposition between radical college associations within the New Left, such as the Students for a Democratic Society (S.D.S.), and other countercultural groupings with no overt political affiliation, such as the hippies and the 'freaks.' While the latter were criticized for their lack of commitment, the former were often accused of displaying a bourgeois attitude. This fracture within the counterculture was also familiar to the Italian underground milieu.

Arcana's translation of the balloon preserves the original reference to 'boojwah,' i.e., the lexicalized pronunciation of 'bourgeois,' whereas Comicon's translation performs a neutralizing form of cultural adaptation. As a sign of the 42 years between Arcana's and Comicon's translations and the change of hermeneutic frames adopted when approaching this type of works, the Marxist-connoted sememe 'borghesucci' is replaced by 'fighetti,' a term whose meaning is closer to 'posh.'

The charge of being a bourgeois during the 1970s had a more powerful socio-political implication, which the adjective 'fighetti' irredeemably fails to replicate. The cl-assemes 'politics' and 'class,' present in the words 'boojwah' and 'borghesucci,' are not

Table 3. Fat Freddy's anti-*boojwah* speech

Original (38)	Arcana (13)	Comicon (190)
"I'm gonna show them boojwah campus radicals just what <i>revolution's all about!</i> "	"Faccio vedere io a quei borghesucci radicali accademici <i>cosa vuol dire rivoluzione!</i> " (Literally: 'I am gonna show those little bourgeois academic radicals what <i>revolution means!</i> ').	"Ora vado e faccio vedere a quei fighetti di studenti radicali che cos'è davvero la <i>rivoluzione!</i> " (Literally: 'I am gonna show those little posh radical students what <i>revolution is truly about!</i> ').

conveyed by ‘fighetti,’ which, in juvenile slang, is instead linked to young people’s outlook, fashion, and a certain ostentation of a wealthy lifestyle – frequently with right-wing and indeed not radical sympathies. By using ‘fighetti,’ Comicon’s translation is likely turning Fat Freddy’s acrimony towards wannabe-campus radicals with a middle-class background into a critique of what nowadays may be considered as ‘radical chic’ left – an expression often used as a slur in (far) right-wing and populist communication.

Within the countercultural milieu, being a ‘bourgeois’ meant being part of the society that radicals wanted to tear down – even though it was also the society some of them belonged to. The stigma of being ‘bourgeois’ is one of the contradictions of the counterculture, and Fat Freddy’s remark accordingly sounds particularly tough. When Arcana translated the text, readers were supposed to share the same frames and feelings towards the Italian middle class and understand the connotative meaning behind this offense. In the case of Comicon, the slur is erased. Among the readers that Comicon targets, some would belong to the middle-class without feeling either shame or resentment for their social position. Comicon’s translation arguably does not entail deliberate censorship of the original text, though its different sensibility erases the politically committed connotation in favor of a more generalized derogatory term.

Conversely, Arcana’s commitment is also shown in manipulating the original material (Figure 5) by adding the paratexts: “Potere agli studenti” and “W la Rivoluzione” on the top of the college walls drawn in another panel.<sup>7</sup>

Arcana’s additions reinforce (and magnify) the isotopy of politics and dissent, displaying a form of endorsement to the revolutionary cause that the translator or editor felt the need to express. These isotopies are narcotized by Comicon’s version, though not entirely erased if the images (such as the panels showing the campus occupations) are deemed sufficient to convey them.

#### 4.4 “The Death of Fat Freddy”

In addition to the magnification of political and seditious isotopic pathways, in translations edited by publishers such as *Stampa Alternativa*, *TFFFB*’s stories often turn into an opportunity to add blasphemous undertones with provocative intents. A good example is “The Death of Fat Freddy” (375-380), initially published in 1980. The story counts three Italian translations, all entitled “La Morte di Fat Freddy,” by *Stampa Alternativa* (1981:23-28), *Mondadori* (2009:157-162), and *Comicon* (2016:95-100). Table 4 summarizes the different translational approaches of the three publishers concerning profanity.

In the first two sentences, the phrases ‘Oh my God!’ or simply ‘God!’ like their Italian equivalents ‘Oddio!’ and ‘Dio!’ may have sounded profane to the conservative

<sup>7</sup> The former addition translates a banner hanging from a window (retained in English), while the latter comes from the translator’s (or the editor’s) initiative.



Figure 5. Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1969 (1974:13), panels 10-14.

Table 4. The translation of profanities

Original	Stampa Alternativa	Mondadori	Comicon
"Oh my Ghod! Franklin!" (376)	"Dio cane! Franklin!" (24) (Literally: 'God (is a) dog! Franklin!')	"Oh mio Dio! Franklin!" (158) (Literally, 'Oh my God! Franklin!')	"Oddio oddio! Franklin!" (96) (Literally: 'Oh God! Franklin!')
"Oh, God, I'll never smoke that stuff again! I promise!" (380)	"Dio cane, non fumerò più di quella roba! Lo giuro!" (28) (Literally: 'God (is a) dog! I'll never smoke that stuff again! I swear!')	"Oh, Dio, non fumerò mai più quella roba! Lo prometto!" (162) (Literally: 'Oh, God, I'll never smoke that stuff again! I promise!')	"Dio, te lo giuro! Non fumerò più quella roba!" (100) (Literally: 'God, I swear! I'll never smoke that stuff again!')
"He's deader'n fucking Hell, all right!" (376)	"Porcoddio! È proprio secco!" (24) (Literally: 'God (is a) pig! He's stone-dead!')	"È più morto del dannatissimo inferno!" (158) (Literally: 'He's deader than the damnest Hell!')	"Eh, sì, più morto di così non si può!" (96) (Literally: 'Oh, yes, he cannot be deader than this!')

political discourse but were not as strong as the blasphemous exclamations added in *Stampa Alternativa*'s translation. In all the excerpts from *Stampa Alternativa* included in Table 4, the blasphemy is prominently positioned at the beginning of the sentence. By using blasphemy ('Dio cane' and 'Porcoddio'), the classeme 'deity' couples with 'animality' and, thus, 'profanity.' Conversely, Mondadori and Comicon provide more literal translations. Interestingly, in the third passage, while Mondadori's version reproduces the original hyperbole with the profanity 'dannatissimo inferno' (which in Italian does not have any particularly offensive meaning), Comicon wholly narcotizes the profane reference, which is nevertheless present in the original.

As for the two mainstream translations, *Stampa Alternativa*'s choices aim to heighten the anti-clerical sentiment and make the original satire even more provocative. *Stampa Alternativa*'s additions in terms of blasphemy seem to be motivated by the influence of the Italian cultural context. In Italy, the long-lasting Catholic heritage influenced the perception of religious offenses, counted as the worst type of insults and cultural taboos (cf. Nobili 2007). This is crucial to understand how religious swearwords are used in the case of *Stampa Alternativa*'s translation, even though they are more or less absent in the source text. Blasphemy has the power to engender opposite reactions and polarize readers; it generates indignation in a conservative audience and laughter in those who share *Stampa Alternativa*'s sensibilities. And precisely because religious swearwords can trigger a reaction in both believers and atheists, the translator decided to magnify this aspect in the translation of underground comix.

We need to stress that Shelton's position towards religion is not particularly harsh. Religion certainly is the topic of goliardic reprises (for example, "Phineas' Big Show," 566-571). Still, Shelton seems to mock sanctimonious attitudes, religious hysteria, and exploitation of people's faith rather than religion and spirituality per se. The story of Fat Freddy's funeral, for example, provides the opportunity to include such characters as the fake – and freak – priest John the Blabtist, who is the protagonist of several humorous gags linked to religion. For example, he reads the Bible upside down or confuses it with Shakespeare's *Henry IV*).

In translation, the character is called 'Giovanni Sbattista' (*Stampa Alternativa*), 'John il Battista' (Mondadori), and 'Giovanni Fattista' (Comicon). Interestingly, *Stampa Alternativa* added the prefix 'S-' to the Biblical reference to 'Giovanni Battista,' which conveys a contrary action and adds the classeme 'profanity': just as the Biblical John baptizes, the freak John deconsecrates. Conversely, Mondadori opts for preserving the English name 'John,' thus making the Biblical reference less obvious to Italian readers. Likely due to the influence of the theme of drugs and the dominant isotopy of addiction in *TFFFB*, Comicon emphasized dope-related humor with 'Sfattista,' by adding the classeme 'intoxication' concerning the 'stoned' condition of the celebrant.

Even in this case, on the one hand, publishers aiming at canonizing underground authors through mainstream circuits relied on a light-hearted hermeneutic reading. In effect, they tried to level what they perceived as an excess. On the other hand, faced with the possibility offered by Shelton's story, anti-clerical publishers could not resist the temptation to express their angst with vigor, laughing not just at religious institutions but at the deity itself.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper employed isotopies as a critical analysis tool to delve into the study of comics in translation. Translation, by nature, entails the negotiation and the choice of the meanings which should be transferred or left dormant. In this respect, it may trigger processes of magnification, narcotization, and even censure of specific isotopic pathways due to the relative importance given by translators to semic elements that sometimes go unnoticed, even as some others may be willingly exaggerated or marginalized.

Berman (1999) argued that texts do not require a literal rendering but a quest beyond words to give a concrete shape to conjectures and hermeneutic hypotheses, thus reproducing the author's style. In this understanding, Berman lamented the ethnocentrism of translations in interpreting what is foreign through one's categories.

This is precisely what happened in the Italian translations of Shelton's *TFFFB*. On the one hand, in militant publications, the magnification of such isotopies as blasphemy and dissent was coupled with an overt cultural adaptation of the original materials. On the other hand, the early independent collections seem to share the adoption of a political frame – clearly influenced by the political unrest of the Italian 'Years of Lead' – which prompted the adaptation of the original text to the Italian context. Verbal texts seem to be modified on account of the premise that a one-to-one relationship between the original and its translations exists on an ideological level. On the other hand, the migration of ideas across linguistic and cultural borders seems to be at the core of the translation process before the qualitatively and philologically correct rendering of texts. Still, this led to the modification of the original contents and the creation of new ones, often disregarding the actual meanings conveyed by the source texts and the isotopic coherence of the word / image syncretism.

As a result, translations sometimes were either wholly detached from the original texts or exaggerated certain isotopies to increase the comic strips' subversive value. This led to the addition of extra-textual references to real-life events (for example, Pinelli's death) and the magnification of the political, dissident, and blasphemous isotopies.

In the cases in which professional translators came into play, i.e., with the publications edited by Mondadori and Comicon, the shared networks of significations and

experiences between source (counter)culture and target culture are certainly weaker. Despite the increased quality of the professional work behind these publications, translation ultimately seems to have added even more distance. Indeed, Comicon's and Mondadori's translation choices often resonate much less with the countercultural jargon than Arcana's and Stampa Alternativa's translations.

Contrary to the political emphasis added to Shelton's texts in alternative publications, the translations published by both houses show no sign of militant undertones. This is likely the consequence of a change in translation practices during the years, which no longer permitted such an extreme form of domestication of the foreign text as the one implemented by Arcana and the early volumes by Stampa Alternativa. The chronological gap only partially accounts for this difference, which also owes a lot to the distance between the latter's target, its readership often overlapping subcultural communities, and the former's wider and 'normalized' readership.

Comicon and Mondadori arguably comply with more conventional, popular, though preferably middle-class attitudes and practices, typical of established mainstream publishers. Consequently, their translation approach tended to mitigate the underground jargon in an attempt to popularize its already selected contents. Both houses opted for a narcotization of seditious contents and slang (for example, the normalization of 'cops' and 'bust'). This does not mean that Comicon's and Mondadori's translations adopt overtly censorious approaches. Still, they do not attempt to recreate Shelton's comix (counter)cultural specificities and even level out their subversive and politically charged meanings. In this respect, rather than their political value, both editions seem to emphasize Shelton's stories' light-hearted comical strain, undoubtedly the most immediately and widely appreciable aspect of his works. This often coupled with the adoption of inappropriate cultural frames, hermeneutically rerouting Shelton's comics towards naughty comedy (for example, Mondadori's addition of 'pollastrella') or by erasing certain key notions (for instance, Comicon's translation of 'boojwah' with 'fighetti' and 'cops' with 'piedipiatti').

In this respect, by relying on the comparative study of comics in translation grounded on isotopic analysis, we highlighted how the adoption of different hermeneutic frames affected the process of interpretation of semantic items and, therefore, the final rendering of the source texts within another culture and, in this case, counterculture. Given their identity value on a social and political level, Shelton's comics represented a meaningful case-study. *TFFFB*'s stories are imbued with the ideological and countercultural system of the U.S. underground values, which challenges the translators with a labyrinth of multi-layered readings. The risk of exceeding, overlooking, or reducing the linguistic and cultural essence of the possible worlds created by Shelton's comics is high. It may ultimately result in a form of censorship, although not a deliberate one. Indeed, though no episodes of overt censorship were encountered in this analysis,

neglecting the original signification patterns and forcing them into the interpretative frames of the target culture may have similar outcomes. In this respect, future research may test the validity of isotopic analysis in the study of deliberate acts of censorship, particularly in the cases where visual manipulation accompanies the verbal. Though initially conceived in relation to verbal texts, isotopic analysis proves extremely useful for the in-depth study of such multimodal texts as comics, where both verbal and visual components participate in meaning-making processes.

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