Beyond the Stage: Exploring the Transmedial Adaptation of "to be or not to be" in *Hamlet on Rooftop*

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Abstract: *Comics blend linguistic resources and semiotic signs to represent different ideas. The rise of online platforms and the ease of digital distribution has made the production and consumption of comics a common phenomenon. In storytelling, their significance is acknowledged as an effective source of visual representation of sequential art. The present study underpins different techniques and strategies employed by Eisner for blending art and literary discourse to create an adapted comic version of "Hamlet"—named "Hamlet on a Rooftop". This comic is set in urban settings, in which Eisner highlights the themes of revenge, inner conflicts, family politics, etc. Focusing on the comical adaptation of Hamlet's famous soliloquy "to be, or not to be", the current study delineates how Eisner has used visual icons, facial expressions, colours, lettering, etc., to tell a visual narrative. The study also explores how the use of sequential visual style in "Hamlet on a Rooftop" gives the narrative flow to this comic. The study's findings enlist different techniques that work as a tool kit for comic writers to represent different ideas in an exciting fashion with the help of multimodal semiotic signs.*

Key Words: Comics, Hamlet on Rooftop, Transmedial Adaptation, Semiotic Signs

Introduction

Recently, the massive interest in comics has given rise to a new form of scholarship called comics studies (Morton, 2015; Eisner, 2008). Comics are multimodal artwork that involves visual and verbal semiotic resources for storytelling. The verbal resources used in making comics may include, but are not limited to, speech or thought balloons, text boxes, sound descriptions, and comic lettering. Similarly, the visual techniques used in comics include colours, lines, shades, icons, shapes, borders, etc. The use of visual and verbal resources in comics has received much attention from scholars from different areas of inquiry, like semiotics, visual arts, animation, linguistics, literature, cultural studies, etc.

One important aspect of comics is the narration which requires at least two panels showing a transition of an event in time. Such a systematic sequence of narration has remained a focus of many scholars in comic studies. These scholars have particularly focused on how the use of semiotic resources in comics contributes to the sequential narration and narrative rhythm (Eisner, 2008; Labio, 2015). Comics are characterized by unique narrative patterns and

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rhythm that consist of various panels successively advancing the narrative. McCloud (1993) refers to such narrative rhythm as 'a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconstructed moments' (pg. 67). Each panel, with its visual and verbal content, attempts to capture a moment in the narrative time (Eisner, 2008). In this way, each panel gives freedom to choose to its reader to examine the semiotic components of individual moments and to contemplate the narrative progression through active participation (Eisner, 2008). So, the reader's agency is also an important aspect of the comics, and the reader is empowered to have control over the direction, momentum, and pace of the comics.

As the temporal progression of narration is realized using the space on a page, some scholars (Chute, 2010 and Morton, 2015) consider comics as a medium than a genre. Though most comic writers use verbal language by employing speech balloons and text boxes, the debate about comics being a genre is not convincing. Chute (2008) and Fingeroth (2007) argue that comics are a medium that can encompass different genres like superhero stories, graphic fiction, digital narratives, autobiographies, etc.

Meiser (2009) has identified three methodological paradigms of narratology. Meister explains that the first paradigm of narratology relates to the narrative's socio, cultural, and ideological context. The second paradigm focuses on the cognitive dimensions of the narrative and its processing in the reader's mind. The third methodological paradigm focuses on the transmedial dimension of narratives. The current study also explores the transmedial dimension of the adaptation and the graphic representation of Hamlet as *Hamlet on a Rooftop*. It is expected that transmedial narratology may take different forms for different media.

According to Zannettin (2014), the visual adaptation may incorporate different strategies like the use of page layout, the shapes of panels, the pattern of their sequencing, and the placement of speech balloons. Furthermore, the comic writer may make certain idiosyncratic choices while remaining faithful to the original source of the adapted version of comics. *Hamlet on a Rooftop* adapts places the protagonist in the urban setting of the city and thus evokes the reader to have a transmedial and intertextual experience of the narrative.

As discussed earlier, comics are a combination of semiotic signs and linguistic resources. The correlation between the multimedia of text and semiotics reinforces the message and effect of the comics. The narrative sequence, the primary focus of the study, is usually generated by the panel composition and layouts. Stylistically, panels either on the same or on the two pages of the comic book give the impression of unity of ideas and narrative sequence just as we experience in the written narratives. Similarly, the shape and size of the panels assist the reader in adjusting the proportion of attention and focus as desired by the comic writer for the guided reading of the comics. Moreover, to give a narrative flow, it is the usual practice to separate the panels from one another by a smooth black colour or to use a cloud-like wavy line (Eisner, 1985). So, different techniques are used to minimize or enhance the effect of the space or gutter between the panels that may produce the rhythmic experience of varying paces in narrative reading.

At the visual level, the representation of facial expressions and body language, especially arm and hand (Baetens, 2004), is the most significant part of comics and a great source of conveying emotions and feelings. Facial expressions are possibly even more crucial for correctly assessing mental states.

In our analysis of *Hamlet on a Rooftop*, the study will attempt to explore how the adaptation of Hamlet into its comical version *of Hamlet on a Rooftop* affects the narrative sequence of Shakespeare's play. The study will also explore if the narrative rhythm and structure may transcend the limitations of media and how much of the narrative sequence is transferred from the literary discourse of Hamlet to its comical adaptation of *Hamlet on a Rooftop*. These research aims guide the study and it attempts to answer the following questions:

The study will answer the following research questions.

i. How does the transmedial adaptation of Hamlet on the Rooftop demonstrate the constraints and challenges of transferring a narrative from verbal mode to comics?

ii. What verbal and visual resources (panel transition, thought balloons, dialogues, visual metaphors, sound effects, etc.) are

used in Hamlet on the Rooftop to produce the narrative sequence?

iii. How does Hamlet on the Rooftop interactively engage the reader in the story by using visual cues, panel composition, and verbal devices?

Literature Review

Though the field of comics is not very old, it is making rapid progress, and researchers have taken a keen interest in this field to unfold the art of comics and their applications in multiple fields. There are three major strands of literature on comics: the first strand of research explores the compositional and narrative nature of visual and verbal resources in comics, the second strand explores the ideological nature of the comic narratives, and the third strand explores the role of comics in educational settings. The following literature review regarding different aspects and scopes of comics will establish a niche for research in the field.

Wallestad ([2012](#)) explored the visual grammar of comics by examining the Japanese contribution to the comics field. He discussed the compositional elements and the role of signs and symbols involved in creating comics. He observed that in the present age, the comic reader population was decreasing, and he suggested that to increase the readers' number, the older version of comic writing on paper should be merged with modern techniques of the present digital world to facilitate the availability of low-price sequential art.

In an automatic comic generation, Chu et al. ([2014](#)) have developed computational systems to convert image sequences in time into a digital comic story. The study identifies that temporal sequence in comics has three main components: the allocation of pages, its layout, and the placement of speech balloons. Furthermore, they propose solutions for the optimal use of speech balloons by introducing the particle swarm optimization algorithm that can propose the most suitable location in comics. Their proposed system for automatic comics generation can potentially change the image sequences into an effectively told story using verbal and visual resources.

In a study about the educational use of comics, Tatalovic ([2009](#)) examined the available literature in the form of comics about science. The researcher also presented an overview of science comics and their communicative power. Moreover, he highlighted the lack of study material in the form of science comics. The study also highlighted the flaws in scientific comic literature that should be addressed.

Lestari & Mustadi ([2020](#)) have conducted a quasi-experimental design study on fourth-grade students to measure the role of comics and animated videos in promoting the storytelling skills of their subjects. For one semester, they exposed 2 experimental groups of fourth graders to animated videos and comics and measured their storytelling skills using a Story Telling Scale. The pretest-posttest-based findings of the study show that the use of animated videos was a more effective way of improving the storytelling skills of the learners.

In another study about the use of comics for academic purposes, Kanimozhi (2014) explored the effectiveness of comics in language learning among college-level students. He selected one hundred college students to judge the hypothesis quantitatively. They were divided into two groups: controlled and experimental, and pre and post-tests were given to judge the progress. The study's findings showed that the experimental group significantly advanced language skills and improved communication in the target language. This fact validated the hypothesis that comics were very useful in teaching language.

A few studies have explored the bodily construction of characters to understand the role of gendered embodiment in comics. For instance, Joy et al. ([2021](#)) explored the point of view of comic creators regarding the portrayal of queen men's body and their role in promoting good health. The study investigated the scope of body images in comics and whether they foster positive or negative tendencies in the readers. For the study, nineteen self-identifying queer artists were selected to perform discourse analysis techniques on five threads: creating unique language, tracing cultural content, expanding the scope of queer men's bodies, self-expression and self-recovery, and establishing connection among the male community. The findings of the study highlight the potential scope of such comics in promoting queer man health issues. The study was convinced that queer art was there to challenge the dominant views giving other possible perspectives to think about.

Furthering this gender focus, many studies have focused on the ideological dimensions of comics. For example, Kölin (2021) investigated the role of comics in academics. In this study, he synthesised previous research to discover the facts about using comics for language teaching. The results showed no systematic approach existed for using comic material in classroom settings. He was convinced that comics were useful in teaching English skills and improving comprehension levels, but there was a need to devise a systematic approach that would guide and help the teacher choose and use comics to benefit the students.

Similarly, Serna-Gutiérrez (2018) investigated the use of language for radical feminism in the first comic book of Wonder Woman. The researcher adopted Fairclough's three-dimensional model for this study and found that Moultan used the language to represent radical feminist beliefs. They portrayed masculinity negatively, and femininity was presented as the opposite. The researcher also discussed ways texts and images are connected to develop the concept of inter-semiosis.

Abreu (2012) investigated the portrayal of female characters in Brazil-based comics published between August 2008 – July 2011. The focus of the study is to analyse the texts, visuals and their relations in constructing the themes in readers' minds from the creators. They used gender studies, the grammar of visual designs, CDA, and systemic functional linguistics for the theoretical background. The in-detailed visual and verbal analysis is done on a single story named Eleven Things that girls love. Other issues were also added to find the intertextuality. The study showed that female characters were portrayed as rational, romantic, and financially dependent on others. The creators focused on the stereotypes presented in Brazilian society regarding women.

Another research by Chavez (1985) studies the impact of comic strips in the perpetuation of gender inequality both in number and how men and women were portrayed. The results of the study proved the hypothesis that there existed a disparity between the comic characters' gender representation and the real situation of the society for which those comic strips were produced. The reason behind this sort of comparison was the covert claim that they represented society. The study's findings showed that the number of male comic characters was higher than that of females, which did not reflect the real ratio of male and female populations. Moreover, the female characters were shown mostly in domestic settings, performing routine household jobs or caring for babies and families.

In 2018, a study was conducted to critically analyse the use of language and women's representation in the memes posted on Meme Comic Indonesia's Instagram account. The researchers selected 21 memes, and the models proposed for the analysis are *Social Semiotic Model* by Kress and van Leeuwen (2005) and Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model (1992). They found that stereotypes generally used for women have changed. They found that the language used for the women's representation to criticize them, like their traits, physical appearance, domestic behaviours, driving behaviours, and occupation behaviours. The researchers concluded that the reason behind this stereotyped language is to warn or criticise women's roles. (Siergar et al., 2018)

Comics can communicate a variety of discourses, like social and cultural, historical, educational, scientific etc., in an effective manner. Nonetheless, there are many linguistic, structural and compositional differences between the everyday linguistics or textual discourses and the multimodal discourse of comics. The current study is based on the adaptation of the literary discourse of Hamlet into a Comic discourse of *Hamlet on a Rooftop*.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm to explore the narrative patterns used in *Hamlet on a Rooftop*—a comic adaptation of Hamlet's famous soliloquy "to be, or not to be". The researcher first downloaded *Hamlet on a Rooftop* by Will Eisner, and, later, each page of the comic adaptation of the selected soliloquy was analyzed to achieve the research objectives. The researcher has applied the theoretical ideas of transmedial adaptation to study how Eisner (2008) has adapted the protagonist of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, for the comical representation in his *Hamlet on a Rooftop*. In a transmedial adaptation, the narrative, characters, themes, motifs, symbols, etc., are transformed or changed according to the target media (comics, movies, music, painting, etc.,). The study explores the constraints and

challenges of transferring a narrative from verbal mode to comics. The study also focuses on using semiotic resources that produce a narrative sequence and rhythm in *Hamlet on a Rooftop*. Furthermore, by conducting the semiotic content analysis, the researchers have studied the relationship between the emotive verbal content or theme of the soliloquy and the embodied representation of Hamlet in the comic.

Analytical Approach

As identified by Meiser (2009), one of the three methodological approaches in narratology is the transmedial approach which focuses on the transference or adaptation of an artefact from one medium to the other medium. Any transmedial study primarily explores medium-based artistic constraints and explores how the change in the medium requires certain stylistic and semiotic variations to fit a work into a new medium. One such constraint is a temporal progression in a narrative, which is relatively easy to maintain in verbal forms. In comics, time is realized in terms of the space or gutter between the panels. In other words, in comics, time is replaced by the space that is taken up by the panels giving an impression of temporal progression in the narrative. To understand the choices made by Eisner to create a narrative sequence in *Hamlet on a Rooftop* it was considered appropriate to analyze this comic from a transmedial perspective.

Secondly, to explicate the stylistic features used in *Hamlet on a Rooftop,* the researchers have followed Eisner's typology of comics that explains different segments of comic production like imagery, timing, framing and expressive anatomy. Particularly, the study focuses on how the expressive anatomy of Hamlet in the comic crystalizes the existentialist themes of the play. The analysis of expressive anatomy is divided into two parts, one focusing on the face and the other on the body of Hamlet. It is believed that the analysis of the embodied representation of Hamlet will broaden our understanding of the transmedial adaptations that involve the transformation of verbal content into visual media. Furthermore, it will be enlightening to reveal how the agony and pain of Hamlet take a possibly modified version in *Hamlet on a Rooftop*.

Data Analysis

Originally the soliloquy of the play Hamlet is given in Act III, Scene I of Shakespeare's play. In the play, arguably, the protagonist is contemplating the thought of committing suicide (Allen, 1938). Hamlet has the existential question of either embracing the agony and suffering of living or committing suicide (Petronella, 1974). The dominant themes of this soliloquy are the meaning of life, the question of suffering pains, the afterlife, and death. In comics, Eisner has not changed the verbal content of the soliloquy but has used visual strategies to represent Hamlet's psychological condition in the face of an existential dilemma.

The splash page of the comic version of Hamlet's soliloquy "To be, or not to be" consists of a single panel spreading on the full margin of the page (see Appendix I). It is a kind of prelude to Hamlet's mental agony under the word "HAMLET"; which is given in a handwriting font from top to bottom direction on the left side of the panel. As for the font style of the word "HAMLET" is concerned, it is written in a pattern of distressed font, which suits the nostalgic condition of the character. Similarly, the same name stands alone to showcase the feeling of loneliness of the protagonist. Furthermore, the lettering of HAMLET with a large font size also highlights the significance of Hamlet. In addition, a complete account of the reasoning is given on this splash page about the sufferings of Hamlet to prepare the reader for what is coming in the upcoming pages of the comic production. The right side of the panel reads "ON A ROOFTOP"; underneath this lettering, the image of a character on a rooftop is given. Through the verbal content of this splash page, a comic reader may easily understand that the person on the rooftop is Hamlet. We know Hamlet in Shakespeare's play was royal in blood and the prince of Denmark; Eisner maintains this lineage as the comic situates Hamlet with the backdrop of Little Belt Bridge, one of Denmark's iconic structures (see appendix, fig 1). The choice of a rooftop is symbolic of the protagonist's loneliness as, in urban settings, rooftops are such places where one can find solitude. So, in the comic version, the character is presented as if he was all alone and taking to himself to reveal his inner thoughts. These settings of the comic align with the themes of solitude and loneliness in the play. This splash page, thus, mentally prepares the

reader's mind about the key themes of the comic and its intertextual.

At the thematic level, the locale of the comics is a metropolitan city that may represent the 'global' city where Hamlet finds himself entangled in the dilemma of existence. The visual depiction of *Hamlet on a Rooftop* symbolises his loneliness, as no person is seen either accompanying him or even in the panel backgrounds. It seems that the protagonist is stranded on the rooftop contemplating the thought of committing suicide. The depiction of facial expressions and body language, especially arm and hand, is the most significant part of this comic. The agony on the face of Hamlet can be captured in a more nuanced manner than that in the original verbal version of Hamlet by Shakespeare.

In the second figure (fig 2), two panels are given on a single page. The upper half of the page has a speech balloon saying, "TO BE OR NOT TO BE" and the bottom half reads "THAT IS THE QUESTION". The juxtaposition of these two images with the speech balloons creates a sequence. The split in the verse produces the effect of cesura—a literary figure of speech. This pause also amplifies the existential nature of the question posed in the second part of the verse. At the visual level, Hamlet's body posture does not change much, but the perspective is slightly zoomed-in on Hamlet, and the background of the rooftop is whitened completely to foreground Hamlet's crouching body posture emphatically. In both panels, Hamlet's leaning posture represents his confused state of mind. Furthermore, Hamlet's eyes and facial expressions explicitly manifest his indecisive state of mind; this contemplating mind of the character is further reinforced by putting his chin on the arm in the first panel but on his hand in the second panel, which is a typical posture for contemplation. The speech balloon, which reads "TO BE, OR NOT TO BE" is given against a black background and can be interpreted as a metaphor representing Hamlet's confusion and pessimism. On the other hand, the second balloon, which reads "THAT IS THE QUESTION" appears with a white background, which in contrast to the first one, shows relative optimism about the question. In both panels, the wide-open eyes are another noticeable feature of Hamlet, representing the abstract agony of confusion in a concrete embodiment.

The next figure consists of three panels in which the reader is required to move his eyes in a Z pattern to understand the sequence of the panels. All three panels again show the character's mental agony, with the help of body posture, stretched face, and grinding teeth. The contrastive alternatives are "WHETHER 'TIS NOBLER IN THE MIND TO SUFFER THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE.." and " TO TAKE ARMS AGAINST A SEA OF TROUBLES, AND BY OPPOSING END THEM!" are interestingly against two different overall backgrounds of the respective panels. Simply put, the distinction between the alternatives is further augmented with black and white colours to show the contrastive nature of the choices. Moreover, the second panel, which is smaller than the other two panels, overlaps the first and the third panel both, and its speech balloon reads "OR" which appears above the head of the half-visible head of a character in a completely dark background. This overlapping speech balloon and the darkness above Hamlet's head all assert that the concept of confusion exists in Hamlet's mind regarding choosing between the two alternatives. Moreover, traces of mental restlessness are reinforced by the black shade cast on the forehead, which is the characteristic feature of all three panels of Figure.3, and this arrangement can be decoded as a head stuffed with immense confusion as if that confusion is gripping the whole body in restlessness.

The fourth figure comprises five panels, of which the first three are placed side by side, almost having the same margin and the remaining two are arranged in an irregular pattern. The first panel shows the character sleeping in a standing posture leaning against the wall of the chimney as if he were too tired to remain awakened. The posture also gives the impression of a lifeless body, and the speech balloon again appears against a comparatively dark background saying, "TO DIE TO SLEEP," which correlates with all semiotic arrangements of the panel. The second panel shows the character sitting against the wall of the chimney in a strange but painful manner, lifting the face upwards and crying "NO MORE," verbalising the internal pain. The setting of this panel shows the systematic transition from standing to sitting position at the same place. The third one in the row poses the character sitting on the ground with legs wide open, putting his head

downwards lower than his knees, and both hands are stretched forward on the ground, and the linguistic signs read "AND.. BY A SLEEP TO SAY WE EDN THE HEADACHE AND THE THOUSANDS of NATURAL SHOCKS THAT FLESH IS HEIR TO…". It is interesting to notice that the word 'sleep' is used metaphorically for death. The fourth panel stands alone owing to its size and having no panel boundary that connects with all the other panels of the page.

Moreover, the painful face and body in this panel are more evident and prominent than in the other panels of this page. The last panel appears square above the knees of the man, and again the character is shown sleeping tiredly, and the speech balloon compares death to sleep and dream. If all the panels are read as a compact unit, they show a transition from sleep to agony, which again ends at sleep, but the peacefulness of sleep is also questioned with the consciousness of sufferings in the form of a dream. So, the continuous restlessness of Hamlet owing to the confused state of mind is once again conveyed forcefully through the sequential art of these five panels on a page.

In the rest of the remaining six figures, the character is shown all alone to maintain the atmosphere of soliloquy. The facial expressions reveal that the face is portrayed in a painful, confused manner where sometimes the intensity of suffering is shown through extra wide-open eyes, painfully stretched lips with visible grinding front teeth, and fingers put into the mouth showing contemplation and confusion. Moreover, the position of the face is also significant in conveying the desired meaning. Secondly, the movement and placement of hands are also helpful in promoting an environment of confusion, restlessness, and agitation. The sitting and standing postures, the regular or irregular pattern of penal sequence, their sizing and separation scheme, and the background colours ranging from white, black, and an in-between two are all aligned in a way to present a comic version of the character Hamlet in such a fashion to make the most of abstract notions of pain and agony a reality in front of the audience.

Conclusion

The detailed analysis of the comic version of Hamlet's soliloquy reveals certain patterns through which comic producers communicate their desired meanings. The arrangement of panels and their distribution to one or more than one page plays a vital role in the narrative sequence. The gutter, i.e., the space among the panels, helps the reader to get pause for interpretation. Sometimes, the gutter is created innovatively, avoiding the traditional way of drawing a smooth borderline. The overlapping of panels and separating them into different sizes help connect the thematic dots of the narrative. Similarly, the background colour of the panel, even the speech balloon, is also given special consideration, as in the given soliloquy, the dark background of the panel augments the concept of sleep. The physical appearance of the character(s) is the heart of comic production. The portrayal of a full figure, medium figure, or a close-up is selected carefully to suit the setting of the panel and the intended themes. It is important to notice that a close-up showing the half body of the character(s) is the best way to engage the reader as they will try to complete the remaining posture of the body as per their understanding of the content of the story, and this indirectly captures the readers' attention. The body posture, facial expressions, and hand placement reveal the characters' emotional, psychological, and inner thinking. Along with these semiotic tools, linguistic resources are useful in the discourse. They elaborate on the semiotic signs of a piece of comics, and their font and boldness help readers find the stressed part of the narration. These are some of the important techniques utilised by comic writers to develop narrative discourse in a unique, effective and interesting manner.

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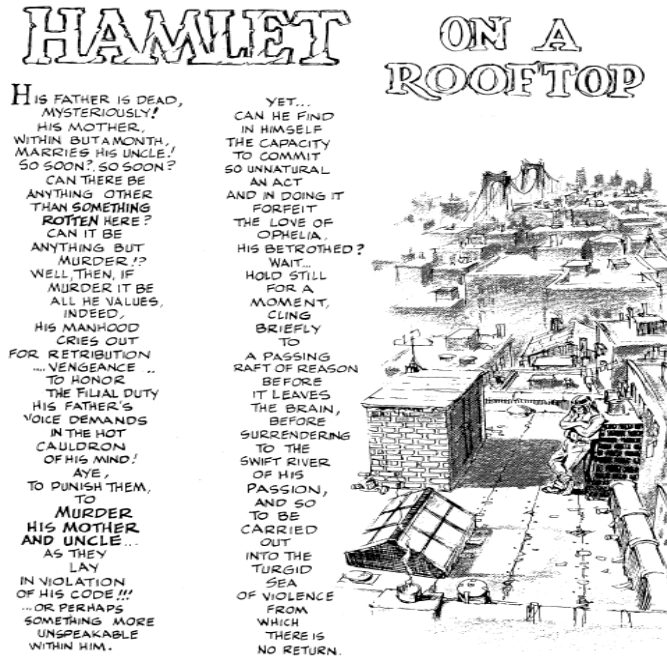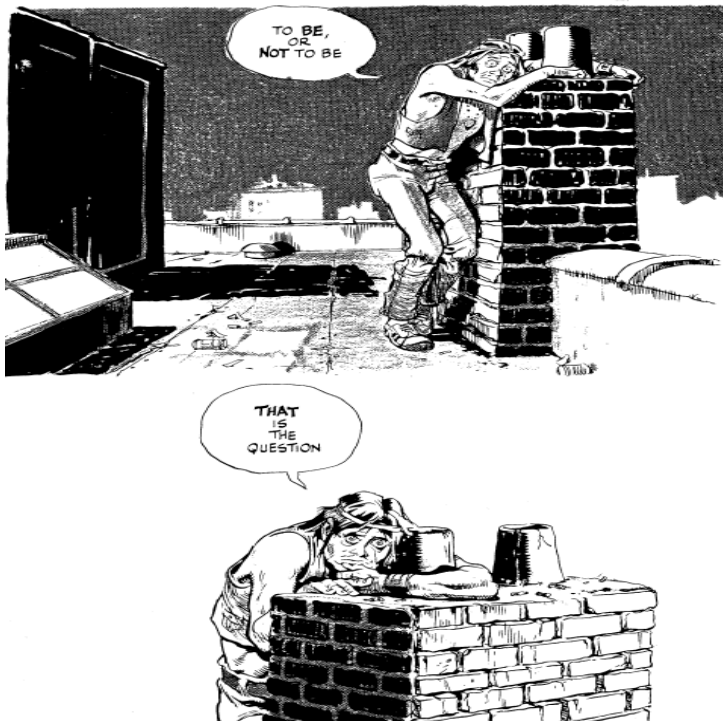Zanettin, F. (2014). "Visual adaptation in translated comics." *Intralinea*. https://www.intralinea.org/archive/article/2079

Appendix I

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11