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FRANZ KAFKA IN THE COMIC. DESCRIPTION OF SOME EXAMPLES

ФРАНЦ КАФКА В КОМІКСІ. ОПИС ДЕЯКИХ ПРИКЛАДІВ

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Abstract: *Franz Kafka is considered to be the author of literature that is difficult to read, the value of which is recognized mainly by a narrow circle of experts. However, looking at some aspects of contemporary and popular culture, and especially the presence of Kafka's works in comics, one needs to verify the traditional belief in the elitism of this prose.*

David Zane Mairowitz (1943-) published in 1993, together with the cartoonist Robert Crumb, the graphic book "Kafka for Beginners", in some editions known as "Introducing Kafka". As for the Mairowitz / Crumb graphic book, it contains several graphic components: comic adaptations of some of Kafka's most famous works, including the stories "The Metamorphosis", "The Penal Colony" or "The Judgment", as well as briefly listed plots of three novels: "The America", "The Trial" and "The Castle". In the work of Mairowitz / Crumb, we also find the most important biographical facts of Kafka, which are partly illustrated with an academic essay, and partly with comic-like frames with sequences of biographical events given in text frames.

The success of publishing houses with a comic presentation of fragments of Kafka's works prompted David Zane Mairowitz to develop the text for the graphic novel entitled "The Castle" (2013), based on the novel of the same name. The author of the drawings for this publication was the Czech artist and musician Jaromír Švejdlík, using the pseudonym Jaromír 99. Mairowitz and Jaromir's a composition is another act of establishing Kafka's work in the world of comics. In "The Castle", however, the variety of comic techniques was limited to a monochrome form of drawing and paper cutouts.

The presence of Kafka in comics results from the inclusive nature of popular culture, whose authors are able to use for their own purposes the sublime art of modern prose. As a result, Kafka's work becomes a sign of the times of modernism, an image of the phenomena of human alienation in the reality of state offices or corporate systems.

Key words: *Franz Kafka, comics, popular and contemporary culture.*

Introduction. From the library to the supermarket. Franz Kafka is widely considered to be the author of sophisticated and difficult to read literature, the value of which tends to be recognized mainly by a narrow circle of experts rather than a large group of common readers. However, looking at the phenomena of contemporary and popular culture, and especially the presence of Kafka's works in comics, one needs to verify the traditional belief in the elitism of his prose. It turns out that the works of this German-speaking Jew from the Czech republic's Prague are attractive not only to literary scholars and philosophers of culture,

but also becoming the basis for the creation of high-volume graphic publications. It is worth discussing several of such works in the scope of this article below - keeping in mind that, of course, there have already been interpretations of this subject [11, 24].

Kafka's works are becoming a commodity on the contemporary literary market. In order to sell well, the goods must be nicely packaged. Comics, although it has already become a separate field of art, is still one of the methods of presenting literature in an attractive way.

Juliane Blank writes about it:

There is no denying that literary

adaptations in comics represent something of a trend. This development is largely linked to the “hype” surrounding comics under the banner of the graphic novel term, from which literary adaptation in comics has benefited in several respects. In the last ten years, an international market for literary adaptations in comics has increasingly established itself. Almost every comic publisher also serves this genre, some organize literary adaptations in their own publication series. In 2007, a publishing house was founded in England that initially specialized exclusively in comic book adaptations. A further confirmation of the “hype” can be seen in the fact that publishers who have not yet published any comics also include literary adaptations in comics in their range – obviously in the hope of being able to benefit both financially and improve their image from a result. [4, p. 12]

One of the reasons that triggered a convention of sorts in the reception of Kafka's work in the emerging comic forms was and continues to be the great popularity of *The Metamorphosis*, *Trial* or *The Castle* among literary critics. Since the printing of Kafka's first stories in 1913, there has virtually been no literary school of interpretation the representatives of which did not attempt to interpret his literary output in their works. From biographical interpretations, through psychological, existentialist, religious, psychoanalytical, formalistic, anthropological, feminist and deconstructionist interpretations, to the post-humanist status of Kafka as an artist and the stylistic features of his hyper-semantic prose, they constantly generate new meanings and interpretations [5, 13]. Since the 1950s, Kafka's works have become a literary phenomenon that eludes unambiguous interpretation, an expression of art that all ambitious creators of culture try to master and name, but they do so with a sense of only partial success in interpretation.

This fact was sensed by the founder of pop art, Andy Warhol, who, when creating a series of large-format portraits of ten famous Jews of the 20th century, also included Franz Kafka among them [10]. The appearance of the writer was modified in a specific fashion. In the monochrome form of photography, commonly known and used in countless editions of Kafka's writings, Warhol obscured some of its elements with colorful, geometric

forms, while others were again underlined with pencil lines. Therefore, he transformed the informational photograph of the original into a sign of his own interpretation: provoking diverse shades of meanings. Firstly, the portrait of Kafka, which - in some fragments - Warhol conceals or covers with elements from beyond the writer's mimetic world, can be treated as a reflection of the behavior of literary critics known to the American artist, who omitted in Kafka's works inconvenient content that did not fall in line with their own interpretative ideas. Secondly, adding contours by Warhol to sketch the eyes or eyebrows in Kafka's portrait can be treated as a graphic comment on interpretative exaggeration of some literary scholars who, for the sake of their own originality, emphasized selected features of the poetics of the analyzed works. Both obscuring and adding new ingredients to the character-portrait of Franz Kafka, as expressed by Andy Warhol, is therefore an artistic reaction to presenting a biased image of the author of *The Trial*.

However, it must be remembered that Warhol constantly exploited the tension between art and fame, or portraiture and making money. Therefore, also in the case of his colored image of Franz Kafka, one can perceive it as an artistic gesture of selling greatness, genius and mystery to the needs of the consumer market [2, 3, 1, 17]. Warhol was able to convince the regulars of social salons and art galleries, as well as the wide masses of the public, that Kafka can also be presented in an attractive artistic form, and that even "esoteric" literature can be used to earn a lot of money. As a result, the image of the writer considered to be an elite artist became a common value of mass culture. Thanks to Warhol, pop culture participants could buy a sense of owning a special product from a high-end modern art supermarket and participating in the artistic life of an educated social class in colorful reproductions of posters, T-shirts or mugs with the face of the author of *The Trial*.

Bluma Goldstein wrote about this issue from a broad perspective:

Warhol's preoccupation with money and status is common knowledge and is reflected in his many prints of dollar signs and paper money. But it is also readily apparent in his

brazen and candid commercialism and his persistent attention to and exploitation of a commodified art market, indeed his appreciation of business itself as an art form [10, p. 128]

Study material. Kafka for beginners

The example of Andy Warhol and his specific artistic insolence and attitude of commercialization towards Kafka's biography and work inspired other artists of pop-art varieties - including comic book authors. One of them is an American, David Zane Mairowitz (1943-). He is not only an author of graphic novels, but also a publicist, writer, adaptator, author of theater plays, creator of radio dramas, and a co-founder of the "International Times" periodical [8]. Regarding the issue of Kafka's reception in comics, the most important thing here is the fact that Mairowitz published in 1993, together with the cartoonist Robert Crumb, the graphic book titled *Kafka for Beginners* (in some editions known as *Introducing Kafka* [20]). Mairowitz also wrote the screenplay for the graphic novel *Camus for Beginners/Introducing Camus* (1998), drawn by Alain Korkos. The very idea of publishing Kafka's writings in the series *Introducing .../... for Beginners* is a consequence of activities undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s by the Mexican journalist and cartoonist Rius (1934-2017) [29], who in the books *Cuba para principiantes* (1960) and *Marx para principiantes* (1972), in a simple, humorous and comic way, presented the basic information about Cuba or about Karl Marx. When Rius' Spanish-language originals were published in English by Richard Appignanesi (1976) in the 1970s, they were a great commercial success. As a consequence, subsequent books began to be published in this publication format, namely: *Freud for Beginners* (1979), *Einstein for Beginners* (1979) or *Darwin for Beginners* (1982).

The example of Rius prepared the comic book audience to receive the graphic book by Mairowitz/Crumb which is of the greatest interest to us here. It contains several graphic components: comic book adaptations of some of Kafka's most famous works, including the stories *The Metamorphosis*, *Penal Colony* or *Judgment*, as well as briefly listed plots of three novels: *America*, *Trial* and *Castle*. In the work of Mairowitz /Crumb, we also find the most

important biographical facts of Kafka, which are presented in an academic essay, which is illustrated with realistic or caricatured images. These illustrations technically constitute a comic book composition, i.e. a graphic frame with the sequences of biographical events shown in text panels (frames). There is definitely more image than text here.

From the content and graphic point of view, it is a significant semantic decision of the author of the text and comic book cartoonist to make the figure of Franz Kafka, known from iconographic materials, not only the hero of the biographical parts of the graphic novel, but also to present his work as a description of the facts that actually occurred. As a result, the reader is suggested to read Kafka's works in an extremely autobiographical form, giving artistic fictional texts and entries from the writer's letters or diaries the same semantic status. This is a great simplification, even vulgarization of meanings, both in relation to Kafka's artistic prose and intimate writings [6]. After all, it is known from the interpretative tradition that his stories or novels should not be read only with the help of realism, and his intimate writings implement various autobiographical strategies, which are not always related to the aesthetic category of mimesis.

The graphic form of the book *Introducing Kafka* also brings consequences to the reception of short stories. On the one hand, in the work of Mairowitz/Crumb, the detailed realism of the author of *The Penal Colony* allowed the contemporary graphic artist to create a suggestive image of a machine that punishes the convict. Also thanks to the realistic representation of certain social phenomena of *The Trial*, the contemporary graphic artist was able to present the world of Europe in the 10's and 20's of the 20th century with many architectural and social details (especially in the images of city life in Prague). However, we deal with a less convincing drawing effect in the adaptation of Kafka's grotesque stories, which are illustrated by Crumb very literally, so that, for example, the figure of the man-bug from *The Metamorphosis* becomes as suggestive as it is trivial. The authors of the graphic novel emphasize the eccentricity, the physical monstrosity of the main character in the work, rather than his hidden humanity,

anguish and sensitivity [21, 22, 23]. The visual and literal message of the comic becomes more important than the metaphorical literary message of the story.

What is most surprising in the work of Mairowitz and Crumb about Kafka is the comic book framing technique, graphic close-ups of the appearance of characters or faces, views with a shortened or extended optical perspective. All these measures are used to present Kafka's family relations or the obsessions and complexes of the author of *The Judgment*. Such a literal nature of the visual message may disturb or provoke readers' opposition. However, with regard to fictional characters from stories or novels, Mairowitz's great concern for the accuracy or precision of recalling pictorial elements in a comic book script and Crumb's very good technique of drawing correspond perfectly with the specificity of Kafka's artistic prose descriptions.

After *Introducing Kafka* was published in 1993, it turned out that the interest in such an unusual, graphic representation of the famous writer is very high. Therefore, subsequent editions of this publication were issued under changed titles. So the following books were published: *Kafka by Robert Crumb* (2005) and *Kafka* (2007). Basically, these were editions similar to the layout of illustrations from 1993, but there were also new comic frames, which slightly enriched the content of the first edition of the book.

Mairowitz's repeated return to Kafka and his works is a form of constant fascination. The American screenwriter does not mean that he is charmed by literary images or the formal perfection of works, but about the kind of activity, about absolute consistency in writing.

As Mairowitz said in an interview:

For me, Kafka is the author of authors. Not because I think every writer should write that way, but because for Kafka writing was everything in life. Although he didn't write as much as others, once he started he couldn't stop. He wasn't concerned with getting from the beginning to an end, but with writing as such. Reading Kafka today cannot be about reading a story from beginning to end. It is about the experience of "reading as such" [12].

Study material. Kafka and the graphic novel

The success of publishing houses with a comic book presentation of fragments of Kafka's works prompted David Zane Mairowitz to develop the text for the graphic novel entitled *The Castle* (2013), based on the novel of the same title. The author of the drawings for this publication is a Czech artist and musician, Jaromír Švejdlík, using the pseudonym Jaromír 99 [14]. He is an experienced artist who also made another, three-part comic book *Alois Nebel*, filmed in 2011.

The Castle of Mairowitz and Jaromir can be treated as yet another example of Kafka's work penetrating the world of comics. It is worth noting at this point that in the Mairowitz/Crumb series *Intruding*, various, sometimes very different graphic techniques of the comic were used, and Kafka's works were dealt with very freely, arbitrarily shortening them and emphasizing the most attractive, according to the authors, fragments of prose. In *The Castle*, on the other hand, the multitude of comic techniques was limited to a monochrome form of drawing and paper cutouts. It is a sign of an artistic decision indicating that the creators wanted to achieve a coherent aesthetic effect and did not strive to shock the reader with new and new graphic forms. In the comic book by Mairowitz and Jaromir, it was more important to create a uniform "graphic atmosphere" that would act as a whole, within one dominant poetics [15].

Jaromir recalled the process of creating the comic:

First I got the script from David Mairowitz. He came to Prague, we said to each other how we understand Kafka, and we agreed that it is not as big a joke as is often explained. David said that it is much funnier in German than in other languages because it is written in such a German official language. We agreed that it could be almost grotesque. That was the first impulse on the basis of which I started looking for characters and doing casting like for a film. From the beginning, I had it approved so I wouldn't go in the wrong direction. So I drew the main characters like K. and Olga. And David was telling me how he would imagine them. At first, we had a lot of disagreements - I saw K. as such a down-to-earth surveyor, and he more like Kafka [16].

In achieving this goal, it was helpful that Mairowitz and Jaromir, encouraged by the comic book publishers, chose only one Kafka's work and decided to create not merely an entertaining comic book full of visual effects, but a sophisticated and intertextual graphic novel [25, 28]. Hence, not an undersized and poor quality paper was published, but a large (over 140 pages) album on cardboard paper. The publication was composed of appropriately planned chapters, sensitively introducing both dialogues and larger narrative descriptions. Of course - as with any graphic novel - Mairowitz/Jaromir's proposal greatly limited the proportion of the original text, but this did not come at the expense of the novel's sense and composition. Kafka's work in the graphic novel genre has therefore become a more formally ambitious and artistically more mature publishing offer than the average commercial comic book.

Before starting the creation of *The Castle*, the author of the script and the graphics agreed on how they imagine the characters of the novel (especially the main character of K., the surveyor), how to solve the issue of the open ending of Kafka's novel, and to what extent they should be close to the literary original in their adaptation. When assessing the literary layer of their graphic novel, it should be noted that no changes were made to the plot here, - preserving the most important events of the work. There was also no representation of the external features of the protagonist which differed from the one in the original - as well as no attempt to caricature or try photographic realism. The most important thing here is that it was not decided to give the character of K. the features of Franz Kafka himself, instead creating the figure of a middle-aged bearded man, depicted in clothes from the 1920s. Jaromir's artistic approach to Kafka's original was hardly a form of imitation: the visual artist searched for his individual ways to express the fictional images. Interestingly - which is a rich field for intertextual research - autobiographical elements from the Czech artist's private existential experience appeared in the landscapes of *The Castle* drawn and cut out of paper. And so, while watching the landscapes of the graphic novel based on the famous author of the world

literature, we can find among them views typical of Jaromir's other art works (especially the theme of the town of Jeseník: lost in the mountainous landscape).

The most interesting aspect of the Mairowitz/Jaromir's *The Castle* is the visual aspect of the publication. The authors of the graphic novel, skillfully dosing the ingredients of realism and grotesque, historical detail and symbol, presented the dark, oneiric and surreal world of K. the surveyor, who strives to find the meaning of life. Expressionism appeared as the poetics of an artistic work in the artists' search for an appropriate graphic side of *The Castle*. In the research tradition, expressionism is unjustly downplayed by some literary critics in relation to Kafka's prose, while, in fact, this aesthetic trend should be the starting point for *The Castle's* interpretive thought [7]. In the graphic novel by Mairowitz/Jaromir, the use of expressionist oppositions: darkness-light, crowd-individual, still-movement, silence-sound found a very apt application [9]. Like in black and white and silent films like *Doctor Caligari's Cabinet* (directed by Robert Wiene, 1920) or *Nosferatu - a horror symphony* (directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922), the main character of *The Castle* wanders around feeling helpless, shown in the face of a strange and dangerous world in sequences of suggestive comic pictures. K., as the protagonist of a graphic novel, like many alienated protagonists of expressionist dramas, performs his actions in a sense of loneliness, which Jaromir clearly emphasized in framing his paintings. Like a character from the plays of Walter Hasenclever or Ernst Toller, K., the surveyor is shown against the background of distant spatial planes, at night, at a distance from larger groups of people and in tense postures of the body. The protagonist opposes hostile people or anonymous forces, but his actions are more and more desperate, and he himself becomes a model of a man, a comic book everyman, due to his schematic nature [27, 30].

Such an approach is not only a feature of the aesthetics of the early 20th century, but also the noir style of comics and graphic novels. The publications created in this spirit are characterized by a monochrome image, a tendency to locate events in the space of the night and specific modeling of characters, which are shown in expressive portraits or

gestures, with unnatural close-ups or symbolic details. Mairowitz/Jaromir's *The Castle* implements the aforementioned formal features of the *noir* style; however, it is different in terms of the subject matter, because it does not contain horror narratives or crime stories, the most typical comic plots and graphic novels of this trend. The *noir* style in reference to *The Castle* signifies the mystery hidden in the darkness of the night, the dystopian mountain landscape and the common, immobilizing snow [18].

Conclusions. Kafka in comics as an aesthetic phenomenon. In this article, only three cases of graphic interpretations of Kafka's characters and works are discussed, but naturally there are many more comic books and graphic novels based on his works on the book market. One can also mention another publishing house, co-created by David Z. Mairowitz, who together with the French graphic artist Chantal Montellier published the comic book *The Trial* (2008). Visually original proposals are comic book albums by Peter Kuper, *The Metamorphosis* (2004) or Sylvain Ricard and Maël and Albertine Ralenti *In der Strafkolonie. Nach Franz Kafka* (2012). Kafka was also presented in a drawing convention by German artists: Nicolas Mahler published the minimalist graphic work *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine* (2014), while Moritz Stetter proposed the graphic novel "Das Urteil" nach Franz Kafka (2015). The work of the author of *The Trial* even appeared in the form of a Japanese comic (manga) by the artistic duo Nishioka Kyodai, which published *Kafka classics in comics* (2020). All of the above-mentioned titles are not typical comic books meant for fun and pleasure. These are rather graphic novels which are an attempt to find an artistic equivalent straight from the pictorial culture to express prose full of symbolism and non-obviousness. In visual terms, Franz Kafka's prose can be illustrated very well in the poetics of a monochrome image, in gestures and facial expressions derived from expressionism, and in such approaches to characters that lend it aesthetic expressiveness and violent drama. It should be noted, however, that contemporary creators of comic book scripts and drawings are not satisfied with the expressionist context, which is why publishing

houses contest the habits of readers/viewers (as in the case of Nicolas Mahler) or refer to oriental pictorial shots which are exotic in Western culture (Nishioka Kyodai).

The strong presence of Kafka the artist and his works in the comic book realm results from the inclusive nature of popular culture - whose creators are able to use for their own purposes (also financial) the sublime art of classical prose and employ it to build a visual image that is easy to perceive and attractive in the form of a graphic image [24]. Moreover, in this act of reaching for the global literary authority, contemporary graphic script writers and cartoonists have a kind of a competition-like struggle with great predecessors, accompanied by a desire to show their own skills, artistic craft or creativity. In such a struggle for influence, Kafka's literature becomes a challenge: inspiring artistic self-development.

In one of the interviews, Andrzej Płoski (a Polish draftsman and painter for several decades (!) illustrating Kafka's work) said:

I am also interested in Kafka because it is still a mystery, and probably not only for me. The fact is that Kafka can be read many times and in various ways, because it is an open art, not fully specified, as if inviting to participation. You cannot read Kafka passively, consume or swallow his books, because they will get stuck in your throat. You have to work on these texts, study them like Kabbalah, or like a trial file.

I read that when he published *The Metamorphosis*, while Kafka was still alive, he did not agree to introduce this insect, the worm, at all. And that is why there was a drawing of Gregor's Father in front of the door on the cover of the first edition. I think I understand why - Kafka did not want to limit the story to the unequivocal story of a man transformed into a beetle or beetle, to be clearly perceived by the reader, and to close the possibilities of other interpretations.

I believe *The Metamorphosis* can be explained in many ways. It may also be the case that the man - the protagonist of this story - wakes up and thinks that he is an insect, he cannot get up, he is simply sick. The reaction of the environment and the family can also be interpreted like a reaction to a sick person, where there is fear and disgust as well. After all, we know it from real

life, some reactions to the loathsome insect and the sick person are similar. It is very brutal. [19, p. 81]

Looking from yet another perspective, Kafka's work is discovered in the 21st century with all its ideological topicality, since it resonates so clearly with the phenomena of postmodern culture. Today's art audience recognizes in Kafka's works illustrated in comics a still strongly felt phenomena of

man's alienation in the reality of state offices or corporate systems. The graphic image of Kafka and the protagonists of his works now also represents the feeling of strangeness and confusion of a man who no longer reads as much - but mostly watches. And so, Kafka, not through words, but rather through images, penetrates the consciousness of the contemporary culture user.

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Анотація. Франц Кафка вважається автором важкочитаної літератури, цінність якої визнає переважно вузьке коло фахівців. Однак, розглядаючи деякі аспекти сучасної та масової культури, а особливо присутність творів Кафки в коміксах, потрібно підтвердити традиційне переконання в елітарності цієї прози.

Девід Зейн Майровіц (1943-) опублікував 1993 року разом із карикатуристом Робертом Крамбом графічну книгу «Кафка для початківців», у деяких виданнях відому як «Знайомство з Кафкою». Що стосується графічної книжки *Mairowitz/Cramb*, то вона містить кілька графічних компонентів: комічні адаптації деяких із найвідоміших творів Кафки, включно з оповіданнями «Метамороза», «Катальна колонія» чи «Суд», а також короткий перелік сюжетів з трьох романів: «Америка», «Процес» і «Замок». У роботі Майровіца / Крамба ми також знаходимо найважливіші біографічні факти Кафки, які частково проілюстровані академічним есе, а частково комічними кадрами з послідовністю біографічних подій, поданими в текстових кадрах.

Успіх видавництва із гумористичною подачею фрагментів творів Кафки спонукав Девіда Зейна Майровіца до розробки тексту для графічного роману «Замок» (2013) за мотивами однойменного роману. Автором малюнків для цього видання був чеський художник і музикант Яромір Швейдік під псевдонімом Яромір 99. Композиція Майровіца та Яромира є ще одним актом утвердження творчості Кафки у світі коміксів. У «Замку» ж різноманіття комічних прийомів обмежувалося монохромною формою малюнка та витинанок.

Присутність Кафки в коміксах є наслідком інклюзивного характеру популярної культури, автори якої вміють використовувати у власних цілях піднесене мистецтво сучасної прози. У результаті творчість Кафки стає знаком часів модернізму, зображенням явищ людського відчуження в реальності державних кабінетів чи корпоративних систем.

Ключові слова: Франц Кафка, комікс, популярна та сучасна культура.