

Representing the unrepresentable:  
Graphic narrative adaptations of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*  
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As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect.

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

The first line of *The Metamorphosis* is so famous it is easy to forget that in the original German, Kafka does not actually use the word “insect” [hmyz] or “beetle” [brouk] but rather the more troubling and ambiguous words “ungeheueren Ungeziefer,” also translated as “monstrous vermin.” It is not, as commonly held, as straightforward as representing Gregor as a cockroach or a beetle, even if his description resembles these insects. In fact, when corresponding with his publisher about the cover, Kafka was adamant that, “the insect itself cannot be drawn” (qtd. in Emirch 127). When we consider graphic novel adaptations of *The Metamorphosis*, the predicament of the ambiguous first line becomes acute since Gregor must inevitably be visually represented. A choice has to be made about how to depict this nightmarish awakening.

In this presentation, will consider four graphic narrative adaptations of Kafka’s text using Thierry Groensteen’s concept of *transécriture*. According to this notion, it is important to make specific use of the unique qualities of the medium when transforming a narrative from one form into another. In the case of *The Metamorphosis*, can the graphic novel adaptation evoke similar conflicting sensations of defamiliarization, horror, and humor as the original while simultaneously using the specific idiom of comics? Moreover, to what extent do these graphic adaptations echo or re-envision interpretations in the history of Kafka scholarship on *The Metamorphosis*? The well-known adaptation by Robert Crumb and David Zane Mairowitz (1994) takes a largely mimetic approach but deploys unusual cropping and panel layout. By contrast, Peter Kuper’s version (2003) and Czech artist Václav Gatarik’s adaption (*Proměna*, 2009) tend to emphasize the more grotesque and alienating aspects of Kafka’s aesthetic. Lastly, I want to briefly consider Dzian Baban and Vojtěch Mašek’s (*Sloni v Marienbadu* 2004), which is more of a

thematic variation on this theme rather than a strict adaptation. What interests me most in this comparison is the extent to which each artist makes creative use of the expressive potential of comics form. In analyzing these examples, the purpose is not necessarily to cast judgment on one over another, but to look for points in common as well as to appreciate the variety of approaches and referential frameworks used in these successive adaptations.