

Subversive Sixties in Ink: Underground Comix, Censorship, and Translation between the United States and Italy

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Résumé de l'article

Cette étude porte sur le phénomène de la bande dessinée underground [*underground comix*] aux États-Unis et sur sa réception en Italie, pays où les traductions de ces oeuvres controversées circulent à partir de la fin des années 1960. Nées de la contre-culture des années 1960-1970, les *undergroundcomix* sont l'un des produits d'une époque de lutte acharnée et de renouveau culturel dans l'histoire des États-Unis. Les sujets de prédilection de cette satire mordante étant des thématiques taboues comme le sexe, la drogue et la contestation politique, de nombreux dessinateurs underground font face au lynchage médiatique, aux amendes et à la saisie de matériel, avant d'être exclus des circuits de distribution. La présente contribution retrace donc le rapport intriqué entre les *underground comix* et les différentes formes de censure dont ils ont été la cible aux États-Unis et en Italie, où les traductions ont été publiées autant par des éditeurs militants que par des éditeurs plus commerciaux à différentes époques. Elle se penche précisément sur Robert Crumb, le dessinateur underground le plus célèbre, et un corpus de bandes dessinées visant à choquer et à subvertir la moralité américaine. L'analyse comparée de plusieurs traductions des mêmes histoires, publiées entre les années 1970 et 2018, montre l'incidence de la présélection des contenus, des pratiques de censure délibérée des matériaux originaux et d'une banalisation de contenus potentiellement subversifs, sous l'influence du genre cinématographique *commedia sexy all'italiana*, sur la réception en Italie des bandes dessinées de Crumb les plus provocatrices. L'étude confirme que, dans le contexte italien, les oeuvres sexuellement explicites de Crumb ne sont pas jugées controversées tant que leur militantisme social est évacué et réinterprété dans un cadre comique par la traduction. Ce dernier argument ouvre la voie à une réflexion sur la façon dont les matériaux subversifs peuvent être « narcotisés » (Eco, 2003, p. 139) par le biais de la banalisation, avec des résultats comparables à ceux de la censure explicite.

Subversive Sixties in Ink: Underground Comix, Censorship, and Translation between the United States and Italy

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Abstract

This study focuses on underground comix in the US and their reception in Italy, where different translations have been circulating since the late 1960s. Underground comix were the controversial product of the 1960s-1970s' counterculture, that is, of a period of struggle and cultural renewal in US history. As taboo contents such as sex, drugs, and political dissent became the core of this needle-sharp graphic satire, underground cartoonists had to deal with media lynching, exclusion from distribution circuits, fines, and seizures of materials. The present contribution reconstructs the twisted relationships between underground comix and the different forms of censorship they faced in their homeland as well as in Italy, where they were translated by both militant and mainstream publishers in different time periods. This study focuses on Robert Crumb, the most famous underground cartoonist, and discusses a corpus of comics dealing with the theme of sexuality used to shock and subvert US morality. The compared analysis of multiple translations of the same stories, published between the 1970s and 2018, shows how the Italian reception of Crumb's most provocative comics was impacted by a pre-selection of contents, practices of deliberate censorship of the original materials and, in particular, by the trivialisation of potentially subversive contents under the influence of the *commedia sexy all'italiana* film genre. It is maintained that, in the Italian context, Crumb's sexually explicit works are not deemed controversial provided they are deprived of social criticism and re-interpreted within a comedic frame through translation. The latter argument paves the way for a reflection on how subversive materials can be "narcotized" (Eco, 2003, p. 139) by means of banalization, whose outcomes are similar to those that result from overt censorship.

Keywords: comics, translation, censorship, Robert Crumb, sexuality.

Résumé

Cette étude porte sur le phénomène de la bande dessinée underground [*underground comix*] aux États-Unis et sur sa réception en Italie, pays où les traductions de ces œuvres controversées circulent à partir de la fin des

années 1960. Nés de la contre-culture des années 1960-1970, les *underground comix* sont l'un des produits d'une époque de lutte acharnée et de renouveau culturel dans l'histoire des États-Unis. Les sujets de prédilection de cette satire mordante étant des thématiques taboues comme le sexe, la drogue et la contestation politique, de nombreux dessinateurs underground font face au lynchage médiatique, aux amendes et à la saisie de matériel, avant d'être exclus des circuits de distribution. La présente contribution retrace donc le rapport intriqué entre les *underground comix* et les différentes formes de censure dont ils ont été la cible aux États-Unis et en Italie, où les traductions ont été publiées autant par des éditeurs militants que par des éditeurs plus commerciaux à différentes époques. Elle se penche précisément sur Robert Crumb, le dessinateur underground le plus célèbre, et un corpus de bandes dessinées visant à choquer et à subvertir la moralité américaine. L'analyse comparée de plusieurs traductions des mêmes histoires, publiées entre les années 1970 et 2018, montre l'incidence de la présélection des contenus, des pratiques de censure délibérée des matériaux originaux et d'une banalisation de contenus potentiellement subversifs, sous l'influence du genre cinématographique *commedia sexy all'italiana*, sur la réception en Italie des bandes dessinées de Crumb les plus provocatrices. L'étude confirme que, dans le contexte italien, les œuvres sexuellement explicites de Crumb ne sont pas jugées controversées tant que leur militantisme social est évacué et réinterprété dans un cadre comique par la traduction. Ce dernier argument ouvre la voie à une réflexion sur la façon dont les matériaux subversifs peuvent être « narcotisés » (Eco, 2003, p. 139) par le biais de la banalisation, avec des résultats comparables à ceux de la censure explicite.

Mots-clés : bande dessinée underground, censure, traduction, Robert Crumb, sexualité.

Introduction

Translation processes inherently involve the selection, negotiation, and even erasure of meanings pertaining to source texts as well as the creation of new patterns of meaning belonging exclusively to the target culture. Eco (2003, p. 139), in this regard, spoke of “magnification” and “narcotization” of meanings, the latter potentially leading to outcomes that resemble overt censorship. Understanding these mechanisms and the relationship between translation and censorship is critical in Translation Studies (TS). In the last few decades, developments in TS¹ have cast new light on censorship as a complex phenomenon, which transcends any simplistic binary opposition between creation and oppression (Kuhiwczak *et al.*, 2011,

1. See Merkle (2002), Müller (2004), Billiani (2007a), Tymoczko (2009), Ní Chuilleanáin *et al.* (2009), Merkle *et al.* (2010), Rundle and Sturge (2010), Ballard (2011).

pp. 366-367; Martin, 2016, pp. 10-11). Francesca Billiani defines censorship as entailing “a form of manipulative rewriting of discourses by one agent or structure over another agent or structure” (2007b, p. 3) and adds that “because translation often, though not always, makes the source culture visible within, and accessible to, the target culture, translated texts tend to attract censorial intervention” (*ibid.*). In this respect, censorship is “multifaceted” and “polymorphous,” “institutional” as well as “self-imposed,” and may even stem from “seemingly ‘neutral’ scenarios” (*ibid.*, pp. 2-3) or “a set of unwritten rules” (*ibid.*, p. 8).² Thus, censorship does not exclusively regard translation practices under repressive regimes but also encompasses subtler forms of constraints. Denise Merkle pinpoints how the transfer of potentially threatening foreign knowledge into different socio-cultural and political spaces may rely on multiple forms of access control, including the

pre-selection of foreign texts or their exclusion from the target culture, preventive or prior censorship that can range from cutting passages in a target text to prohibiting its publication, self-censorship (proof that prior censorship has accomplished its purpose) and post-censorship (unsuccessful prior censorship). (2018, p. 225)

In addition, “new censorship” forms include “cultural selection processes (such as canon formation), economic forces, social exclusion, professional marginalization, silencing through specialized discourses, communicative norms, and other forms of control and regulation” (Müller, 2004, back cover).

Based on these premises, the present paper discusses a relatively unexplored area of research:³ the multi-layered relationship between translation and censorship in comics. It focuses on irreverent comics known as underground comix that were a product of the US counterculture of the 1960s-1970s, reflecting the latter’s revolutionary spirit and embodying one of its most avant-garde artistic manifestations. The first section briefly presents underground comix as a subversive phenomenon, addressing its conflictual

2. The multifaceted relationship between censorship and translation is also discussed in Tan (2017).

3. Notable exceptions are Zanettin’s studies (2017, 2018) on how the translation of comics often entailed 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 in response, for example, to the US Comics Code Authority.

relationship with censorship in the US and the role played by explicit sexual content. The second section is dedicated to the Italian translations of Robert Crumb's comix, among the most famous and controversial within the underground scene, and more specifically to the analysis of a selection of his works dealing with the theme of graphic and unfiltered sexuality. Drawing on the idea that censorship and cultural regulation forces act in manifold overt and covert ways (Billiani, 2009b; Merkle, 2018), I argue that the reception of Crumb's comix in Italy is affected by three—often combined—forms of control: (1) the pre-selection of contents; (2) deliberate censorship by means of visual and/or verbal manipulation of the original materials; (3) the banalization of subversive themes through translation, notably by adopting trivial interpretative frames. This third form leads to a discussion on the importance of the *commedia sexy all'italiana* cinematographic genre in Italian culture and, in particular, in the reception of Crumb's controversial art in Italy. The analysis of the translations thus ultimately presents an opportunity to investigate how moral censorship and obscene manipulation may intertwine in subtle and seemingly contradictory ways. I further argue that subversion, in this case, is domesticated by re-framing what is deemed unsettling and potentially threatening on moral and intellectual grounds by means of translation choices that create a light-hearted and relatively harmless lewdness. The specificity and countercultural value of the originals are replaced by an interpretation based on Italian cultural capital, in which sex is not subversive provided that it is framed as trash comedy.

1. Underground Comix, Subversion, and Censorship

To understand how the history and reception of underground comix are linked to censorship processes, it is necessary to discuss the extent to which these subversive art forms, aimed at challenging the mainstream comics industry and overturning dominant socio-cultural norms, occupied a central position in US counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. In his ground-breaking study on subcultures, Dick Hebdige states that subcultural forms are “profane articulations” as they “express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioural codes, law breaking, etc.)” (1979, p. 91). Subcultural manifestations represent symbolic forms of resistance, a disturbance to the hegemonic power, and a direct blow to “the myth

of consensus” (*ibid.*, p. 18). Subversion, intended as a modification or utter destruction of the codes belonging to the dominant culture, is connected to the formulation of new codes and calls for increasingly extreme forms of expression of dissent. However, as a “crime against natural order” (*ibid.*, p. 3), it also entails different forms of repression.

Hebdige’s definition of subculture is relevant to the US social landscape of the 1960s, which saw the birth of the counterculture⁴ and the onset of underground comix as a new form of expression of socio-political dissent. According to cartoonist Jack Jackson,

comix—the “x” suggesting x-rated or an adult readership—was our spelling for alternative books so readers would know at a glance that these were special books, different than regular comic books. The subjects were dope, sex and altered consciousness of some sort as opposed to mainstream subjects. (cited in Skinn, 2004, p. 12)

The label “underground comix”⁵ served as an umbrella term to comprise the work of a heterogeneous group of cartoonists discontented with US society and its value system, as well as hostile towards US (self-)censorship of comics, which they held responsible for the decay of the comics industry. Indeed, since 1954, the comics industry had been controlled by the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a self-imposed censorship body aimed at regulating the content of comic books.⁶ Comic books complying with CCA’s norms displayed on their cover the seal “Approved by the Comics Code Authority,” whereas comics with no seal were more than likely to be boycotted by news vendors.

The strict self-censorship imposed by the Code was unprecedented in the history of American communication media. It was composed of 41 requirements regulating comic-book imagery, text, covers, titles, and advertisements. Overall, it dictated the style and content of the whole medium, and the CCA’s censors decided whether a comic book complied with its standards of morality and decency. The Code had a devastating effect on the comics industry. Many publishers were unable to get the seal of approval

4. On US counterculture, see Gitlin (1993); Anderson (1995); Braunstein and Doyle (2002).

5. For key studies on underground comix, see Estren (1974); Sabin (1993, 1996); Rosenkranz 2002; Skinn (2004); Danky and Kitchen (2009a).

6. For a thorough analysis of the events which led to the creation of the CCA and its aftermath, see Hajdu (2008).

for distribution. According to David Hajdu (2008, p. 315), between 1954 and 1956 more than half of the comic books disappeared from US newsstands, the number of titles published dropped from about 650 to some 250, and publishers went bankrupt.

Immediately following the creation of the CCA in October 1954, EC Comics editor Harvey Kurtzman launched the sixteenth issue of *Mad*, entitled “COMICS GO UNDERGROUND!” The title could not have been more prophetic: a mere dozen years later, underground comix began disrupting the stalemate by pushing the boundaries of the medium with graphic content that tackled “forbidden” issues such as sexuality, political violence, religion, and drugs. Authors did not submit their works to the CCA for approval and thus were unable to sell them on newsstands. They either self-published or worked in collaboration with underground papers and college magazines that shared the same countercultural values and were attracted by flamboyant graphics. According to James Danky and Denis Kitchen, the underground press kick-started the underground comix revolution and connected its proponents:

The editors of the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the *San Francisco Oracle*, the *East Village Other*, and thousands of similar papers nationwide combined a free-swinging journalistic style with a strong visual sense, attracting a small army of artists whose wild graphics and mind-boggling satire exploded in their pages. (2009b, p. 17)

Their libertarian creed prompted underground authors to create their own publishing houses (e.g., Print Mint, Last Gasp, Rip Off Press), with a distribution system based on a web of poster shops, record stores, flea markets, street hawkers, and headshops.

Although comix artists came from different parts of the country and different backgrounds, the capital of the underground experience was San Francisco, where, on 25 February 1968, Robert Crumb published *Zap Comix 1* (1968a), unanimously considered the benchmark for this generation of cartoonists. While *Zap* was certainly not the first comix to be published, it undeniably revolutionized the comics medium. Mark Estren (1974) argues that *Zap 1* united the West coast and the mid-West, thereby contributing to the cohesiveness of underground comix as a movement. It could also be argued that underground comix took off thanks to *Zap*.

The originality and freshness of underground works, together with the allure of taboo themes, furthered the success of what was

not originally intended as a mass production; consequently, the fame of comix prompted the reaction of censorship organs. To avoid punitive actions, a number of authors worked under pseudonyms,⁷ while local authorities tried to curb circulation by relying solely on obscenity charges. Since it was hard to stop the under-the-counter proliferation, they also intimidated distributors and vendors. Estren's account mentions the arrests of Berkeley bookseller Morris Moskowitz for the possession of *Snatch Comics 1* and *Zap Comix 2* in 1968 and of Phoenix Gallery owner Simon Lowinsky for the exhibition of *Zap* collective's cartoons in 1969 (1974, pp. 231-241).

Estren also relates the escalation of events which led *Zap Comix 4* (Crumb *et al.*, 1969c) to become the first comic book in US history to be found legally obscene. The infamous fourth issue of *Zap* was confiscated soon after its publication in 1969, with retailers arrested on obscenity charges (Estren, 1974, pp. 231-241). *Zap Comix 4* is one of the clearest manifestations of the authors' cynical socio-political view of society, family, and humankind as a whole. The graphic sex acts depicted (particularly the incestuous activities in Crumb's "Joe Blow" [1969a]) were above all subversive, the clear expression of a counterculture refusing—and often explicitly antagonizing—the dominant culture, its values and "remaining vestiges of decency" (Skinn, 2004, p. 65). In this respect, comix coupled sex, satire, and sedition, which jeopardized the values of traditional America (see Rosenkranz, 2002). Comix alleged to be obscene were seized because this was the easiest way to silence the political views of their authors. As a result, the large number of sex-themed comix contributed to the dismissal of underground works as trivial sex publications. Paul Buhle maintains that the "sex sells' motto" (2009, p. 40) undoubtedly prompted the distribution of low-quality works exclusively aimed at satisfying the demand for uninhibited comics. Nonetheless, it would be reductive to overlook what sex in comix actually stood for.

Overt sexual activities in *Zap Comix 4* and several other graphic works were blatantly exhibited for satirical purposes and to gain new spaces of freedom of expression, while also reflecting the countercultural stance towards sexuality. In this light, US counterculture coincided with the sexual revolution, whose most

7. For example, Frank Stack signed his works as Foolbert Sturgen to protect his university tenure, while Jack Jackson used the alias Jaxon because, during the early 1960s, he was a government employee (see Skinn, 2004).

important achievement was to raise public awareness about sex, thus loosening the stigma against those who did not comply with what was perceived as “decent” and “respectable.” Sex was held to be revolutionary: since it was a taboo subject for self-righteous US society and decency was the bastion of their culture, sexuality could be turned into the perfect battleground for the counterculture (Anderson, 1995).

Specifically, on the comics battleground, sex was perceived as a subject unjustly obscured and relegated to the sphere of the unspeakable and the unrepresentable owing to the mainstream inclination towards Puritan bigotry. Comix aimed, therefore, to demystify the topic and to treat it as a simple fact of life, while satirizing mainstream comics for having removed the sexual sphere from the life of their heroes. Furthermore, given the shocked reactions sexual matters generated among US bluenoses, comix stretched the boundaries of all possible graphic representations of sex, thereby prompting the so-called “smut revolution” (Skinn, 2004, p. 60) of comic art.

In this context, the full portrayal of sexual desire and deviancies constituted the greater part of Crumb’s artistic quest during the countercultural years, eliciting both praise and harsh criticism within and without the underground milieu. Crumb is recognized worldwide as the most famous cartoonist linked to this irreverent artistic movement, and his works as the most iconic examples of comix. For these reasons, the scope of the following analysis has been narrowed to focus on the translations of his works, in order to look at how their sexual contents have been tackled by different publishers, in different time periods, and in a different country, namely Italy.

2. Comix in Translation: The Case of Robert Crumb in Italy

In Italy, most US underground cartoonists’ comics were translated within the underground circuit and only a few voices were represented by one or two comic strips included in anthologies, magazines, and fanzines addressed to a niche readership of aficionados. Conversely, the success of Crumb’s comix attracted the interest of both mainstream and independent publishers early on, and his were the first underground works translated into Italian. Fritz the Cat’s adventure in “Fred the Teenage Girl Pigeon” (1965) appeared in *Ali Baba Speciale* (1968g), the supplement of the influential Italian comic magazine *linus*, founded by Giovanni Gandini in April 1965 and

published by Figure, subsequently renamed Milano Libri.⁸ Crumb's most famous characters, Mr. Natural and Fritz the Cat, were serialized with a certain continuity by *linus* as of 1970 and 1972, respectively, while Crumb's first two book format anthologies, entitled *Fritz the Cat* (1969b) and *Head Comix* (1968b), were translated and published by Milano Libri (Crumb, 1972, 1973a).

From the late 1960s until the 1990s, Crumb's works were also translated by militant publishers (e.g., Savelli and Stampa Alternativa) and radical activists (e.g., Angelo Quattrocchi) who considered him an icon of the US counterculture.⁹ Likewise, Crumb's art was included in several newsstand magazines (*Blue* and *Totem*)¹⁰ and book format anthologies by more mainstream publishers, from small ventures such as Acme and Mare Nero to major houses such as Mondadori.¹¹ Given the inherent differences in this corpus of publications,¹² it is worth taking a first—although certainly not exhaustive—look at the different approaches adopted to tackle

8. Milano Libri was the first Italian company to bet on the potential of a magazine entirely dedicated to comics. *linus* was named after the iconic character in Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*. It focused on both national and international leftist adult comics and satire, as well as articles and editorials on politics, society, literature, cinema, music, and cultural highlights. On the history and cultural role played by *linus* in Italy, see Farina (2013) and Interdonato (2015).

9. During the 1960s-1970s, several independent publishing houses were founded by militant intellectuals to voice and spread radicalism in Italy (e.g., Savelli in 1963; Stampa Alternativa in 1970). These houses published political pamphlets, countercultural texts, as well as comics. Savelli, for example, published the magazine *Fallo!*, edited by Angelo Quattrocchi, a leading figure of the Italian underground and founding member of the Ippi party. Quattrocchi had first-hand knowledge of the US counterculture and personally met Crumb, whose comix he edited not only for *Fallo!*, but also for the magazine *RisoAmaro* and his publishing house, Malatempora. To explore the complex web of Italian militant publishers during the 1960s-1970s, see Echaurren and Salaris (1999); Balestrini and Moroni (2003).

10. *Blue* (1991-2009) and *Totem* (1980-1998) were Italian monthly newsstand comics magazines, the former with a focus on erotic comics, the latter combining erotic stories, humour, and satire. *Totem* was published by Edizioni Nuova Frontiera, which also issued the series *I Classici di Totem: Crumb Comics* from 1998 to 2000.

11. Throughout the paper, several Italian publishers are mentioned; some, such as Comicon, Acme/Macchia Nera, Mare Nero, Granata Press, and Comma 22, are small/medium-sized ventures entirely dedicated to comics. By contrast, comics are only a part of the catalogues of Feltrinelli, Franco Cosimo Panini, Bollati Boringhieri, Castelveccchi, Repubblica, and Arnoldo Mondadori. Among them, Mondadori is currently the largest publishing company in Italy; since 1991, it is controlled by Fininvest, a Silvio Berlusconi family holding company.

12. See References for a full list.

Crumb's graphic contents, in which sexuality is used to subversive political ends.

2.1 Pre-Selection of Contents

Given the considerable number of comix on the theme of sex produced by Crumb, this topic may be expected to dominate Italian publications. However, many mainstream and independent publishers opted for a pre-selection of the contents and avoided Crumb's most controversial works on the theme. Rather, they focused almost exclusively on Crumb's most popular character, Fritz the Cat. Several anthologies dedicated to the iconic cat were published by Milano Libri (Crumb, 1972), Acme/Macchia Nera (1993a), Mare Nero (2002), and Comicon (2015a), and those published by major publishers, such as Repubblica (2005) and Mondadori (2009b), even featured Fritz on the cover.

The reasons for Fritz's popularity in Italy are likely to be found in the lighter contents of the stories: despite their sharp and witty satire, Fritz's adventures belong to an early phase of Crumb's experimentations and cannot be considered as extreme as his works from the smut phase. Fritz's stories were thus more palatable to mainstream, middle-class, Catholic readers willing to approach Crumb as a "master of American comics." They possibly did not know what the counterculture was and were easily disconcerted by such later publications as the infamous *Zap 4*. In contrast, it is not surprising that underground publishers avoided selecting Fritz's adventures for translation. For example, in the anthology entitled *Fallo! Comix [Do It! Comix]*, published by the magazine *Fallo!*, Quattrocchi warned his readers that the collection did not feature Fritz the Cat, which he considered Crumb's dullest, most "leccatissimo [overpolished]" character, and that it was devoid of excess nudity: "non ci abbiamo messo quelli con cazzo e fighe ovvi [we did not add obvious dicks and cunts]" (ca. 1970, p. 1). Rather, the anthology aimed to present Crumb's "fumetti di battaglia e di commento [combat and commentary comics]" (*ibid.*). This selection can be partially explained by the fact that the publisher Savelli was already dealing with obscenity charges for the publication of *Fallo! Oltre la Gelosia l'Amore [Do It! Love Beyond Jealousy]* (Quattrocchi, ca. 1970); the issue was ultimately seized at the same time *Zap 4* was under trial for obscenity in the US. Therefore, it is likely that Crumb's most controversial works were not included in *Fallo!* to avoid further

legal issues and presumably also to showcase the stories Quattrocchi considered more militant and politically thought-provoking. This did not mean that sex was obscured, but rather that Crumb's art was to be explored beyond both the "sex sells" motto and the idea of Crumb as an author of disengaged "pornzines."

Other publishers, notably Granata Press (Crumb, 1992a), Franco Cosimo Panini Editore (1993b), Feltrinelli (Crumb and Mairowitz, 1995), Bollati Boringhieri (Crumb and Mairowitz, 2008), Comma 22 (2008), and Castelveccchi (Crumb, 2011b), decided to focus on Crumb's post-counterculture works from the 1980s onwards, presenting them as *fumetto d'autore* [*d'auteur* comics]. In these cases, they opted for translations of Crumb's less provocative works, devoid of the smut and scatological excesses that had characterized his comix. In 2011, Mondadori also translated one of his most famous later works, *Il Libro della Genesi* [*The Book of Genesis*] (Crumb, 2011a, 2009a), in which Crumb illustrated all 50 chapters of Genesis, reproducing word for word the Biblical text, with no parodist intent or satirical innuendos.

The most sexually provocative works found their place in more alternative channels, especially in Stampa Alternativa's collections, which zestfully promoted the circulation of underground comix in Italy. Editor J.D. Jakini (Gian Domenico Iachini) published a selection of works from *Snatch Comics* (1968-1969) and *Jiz Comics* (1969d), among others (see Crumb *et al.*, 1992, 1994b, 1996); he also edited the translation of *Zap Comix* 0-4 (Crumb *et al.*, 1998), presenting for the first time in Italy the most subversive issues of the iconic magazine. Stampa Alternativa published a volume dedicated to Crumb's Mr. Natural, which included several stories with graphic content (2004). Stampa Alternativa's pre-selection thus seems to have been driven by objectives opposed to those of the previously discussed publishers. Its volumes purposefully translated some of the most daring and shocking comix, including graphic representations of sexual deviancies. The aim was to appeal to a niche readership who could appreciate and understand both the artistic and political value of these works, while openly provoking and challenging public decency and Italian bigotry.

To reconcile these two opposing stances, several editors have attempted to publish the complete collection of Crumb's works. For example, *Totem* magazine's publisher Edizioni Nuova Frontiera

decided to translate all his works in the series *I Classici di Totem*. The original project aimed to produce fifteen monthly issues resembling *The Complete Crumb Comics* collection (Crumb, 1987-2005), which included all the comix. However, *Totem's* collection stopped after seven issues randomly published between November 1998 and March 2000. More recently, Napoli Comicon¹³ presented Crumb in the series *I Fondamentali* as one of the most influential international cartoonists. So far, six volumes¹⁴ and an art book entitled *Art & Beauty Magazine* (2018c) have been published, all printed on high-quality paper with endnotes and comments on the translation. Nonetheless, as the next subsections show, these ambitious projects have been affected in particular by the visual and/or verbal manipulation of the original materials, as well as the adoption of trivializing hermeneutic frames.

2.2 Overt Censorship and Manipulation

Apart from censorship through pre-selection, in some cases the Italian translations have been subjected to the deliberate erasure of visual and verbal content. An example is the erasure of the last panel of the five-page story entitled “Mr. Natural,” originally published in *Zap Comix 2* (1968c; Figure 1) and translated in Milano Libri’s *linus* (1970c; Figure 2). The story narrates the adventures of Mr. Natural, Crumb’s caricature of a phony guru trying to seduce female hippies on the streets of San Francisco. The ending shows the old guru surrounded by an adoring crowd of groupies and, in the last panel, having sex with one of them as the narrator jokingly calls him “Mr. Snatcher.”

13. Napoli Comicon, with no connection to the original New York convention, is a comics publisher located in Naples, where the eponymous comics convention has been held annually since 1998. It focuses on high quality national and international *d’auteur* comics.

14. *Kafka, Dick, Bukowski visti da Me* (2014), *Fritz il Gatto e Altri Animali* (2015a), *La Musica di Crumb* (2015b), *Mr. Natural e Altri Perdenti* (2017), *Le Donne* (2018a), *Mr. Underground* (2022).



Figure 1. Robert Crumb, "Mr. Natural" (1968c, p. 48).

In *linus*, however, the last panel is censored and substituted with a balloon saying: "Per questo mese, almeno...FINE...*psst...psststt* [At least for this month...it's the end...*psst...psststt*]" (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Robert Crumb, "Mr. Natural" (1970c, n.p.)

The choice is clearly made to avoid explicit sexual content, especially intercourse between an old man and a young girl.

Another example of the censorial attitude towards Crumb displayed by *linus's* publisher is the choice to translate in 1973 the Viking Press's edition of Crumb's *Head Comix* (1968b), which is infamous for its arbitrary censorial manipulation of the original materials. For instance:

- In “Life Among the Constipated [Vita fra gli stitici, p. 3],” the original paratextual elements are modified by erasing the racial slurs “Schwartz” and “nigger” written on a wall (1968d, 1973a).
- In “Head Comix [Ehi Boparee Bop, pp. 37-38],” four panels featuring two characters sexually harassing a woman have been removed (1968e, 1973b).
- In “Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics [same title, pp. 16-18],” the image of a vagina is covered with patches drawn by another artist (1968f, 1973c).

Even though an uncensored version of *Head Comix*—a true milestone for the diffusion of Crumb’s art in the US and abroad—had been reprinted by Ballantine (Crumb, 1970a) two years after Viking’s censored edition, Milano Libri opted for the translation of the censored volume. Although the Italian editors did not intervene directly in the text, here the censorial act resides in the choice of Viking over Ballantine.

Such censorial tendencies can be discerned in more recent publications. An eloquent example is the Italian translation of “Whiteman Meets Bigfoot,” originally published in *Home Grown Funnies* (1971)¹⁵ and included in *I Classici di Totem* (hereafter *Totem*) in 1998. The protagonist of the story is the well-known Whiteman, portrayed as the prototypical American middle-class businessman, who is sexually and socially repressed, tired and frustrated, and oppressed by family and job-related duties. In developing the character, Crumb was influenced by the success of Freudian theories, which argued that civilization could only be achieved through the loss of freedom. Countercultural artists and activists believed that Establishment discipline and rules were suffocating natural instincts (see Freud, 1995 [1905]). This is a leitmotif in Whiteman’s adventures, including the story “Whiteman Meets Bigfoot,” in which the character’s conformity to social norms is challenged through his encounter with the female bigfoot Yetti, who embodies wildness and freedom from the chains of civilized society. Throughout the story, she helps liberate Whiteman and ultimately becomes his life mate. The storyline revolves around the meeting of opposing worldviews embodied by the two characters: feminine versus masculine, wildness versus civilization, freedom versus social constraints, and uninhibited sexuality versus (self-)repression. Clearly, sexuality plays a crucial

15. Page numbers of the original version refer to *The Complete Crumb Comics 8: The Death of Fritz the Cat* (1992, pp. 8-29).

role and much of the story focuses on Whiteman's repression and urges. However, in *Totem's* translation, entitled "Whiteman Incontra Bigfoot" (1998), the page showing graphic sexual intercourse between Whiteman and Yeti is subjected to an extreme form of visual and verbal intervention in the text (Figures 3 and 4).

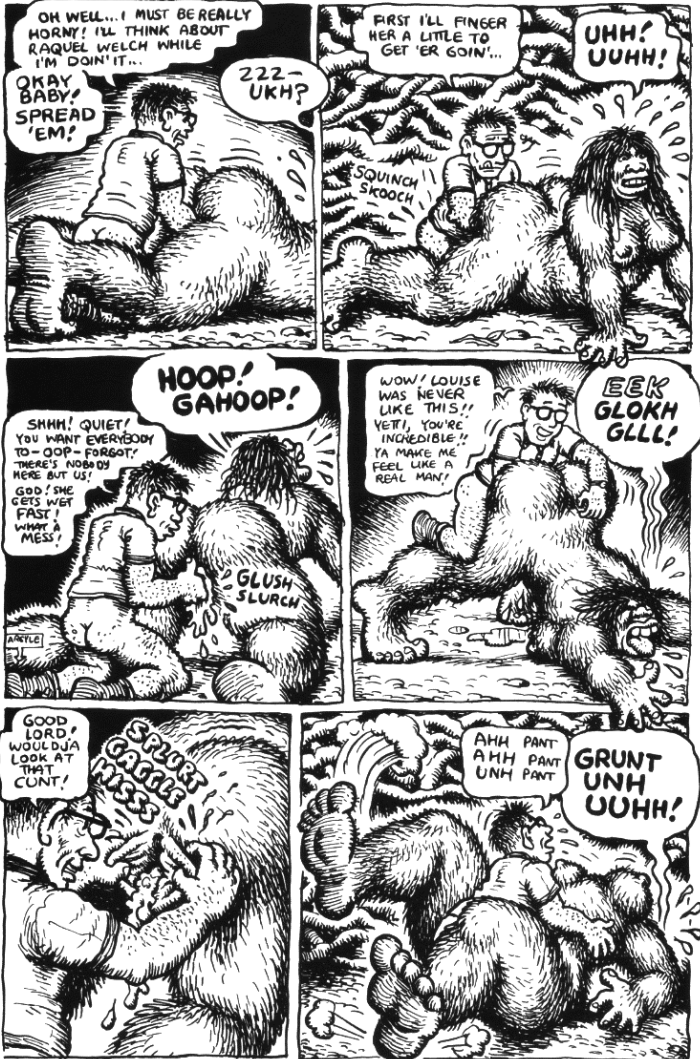


Figure 3. "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot" (1992 [1971]), p. 16).



Figure 4. "Whiteman Incontra Bigfoot" (1998, p. 67).

A first element to notice is that, on a visual level, the Italian version displays an arbitrary and definitely unusual blackening of female genitalia as well as the erasure of vaginal fluids (panels 3 and 5), likely deemed too explicit for the Italian readership. Unlike the previous example, the panels are not removed and readers can still see they represent sexual intercourse. However, it is interesting

to highlight that, in previous panels, the fluids were not erased (pp. 64-65), perhaps because they are not combined with a graphic representation of genitalia during a sexual act. It is also worth noting that the onomatopoeias are left in English, a choice which is consistent in all the versions of the story discussed in this paper. This confirms Munoz-Luna’s findings regarding onomatopoeic sounds in comics, which often tend not to be translated and reproduce the ST (2020), given that they are probably sufficiently intelligible to the Italian audience.

The above excerpt also proves how visual censorship combines with verbal censorship, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Translation of Crumb’s “Whiteman Meets Bigfoot”—part 1

Panel	Original version (p. 16)	Translation (p. 67)
2	“First I’ll finger her a little to get ‘er goin’...”	“ <i>Sarà meglio accarezzarla... uhm, com’è ispida...</i> ” [Better caress her...uhm... how bristly!] (my trans.)
3	“God! She gets wet fast! What a mess!”	“ <i>Lascia fare a me...</i> ” [Leave it to me...] (my trans.)
5	“Good Lord! Wouldja look at that cunt!”	“ <i>Che mondo sconosciuto!</i> ” [What an unknown world!] (my trans.)

In the original version, Whiteman’s way of speaking changes as he progressively frees himself linguistically from the social constraints he felt compelled to abide by. Once his composure starts crumbling, his register becomes coarser and coarser. In panel 2, *Totem* considerably mitigates the coarseness of “finger her” by replacing the expression with “*accarezzarla*” [caress, pet], also adding “*com’è ispida*” [how bristly], which is not present in English but evokes the idea of Yetti as an animal-like character. One could surmise that, in addition to the mitigating—even censorial—intent highlighted by these translation choices, the translator is somehow hypnotized by the image and lingers over the description of the scene rather than paying close attention to the ST words.

In panel 3, the Italian translation “*Lascia fare a me...*” [Leave it to me...] removes the verbal reference to vaginal fluids, already visually deleted from the panel. The crescendo of Whiteman’s linguistic and sexual liberation culminates in panel 5 with the exclamation: “Good

Lord! Wouldja look at that cunt!” as the character looks at Yetti’s vagina. Whiteman is finally released from his moral constraints and, by discovering a freer sexuality, he also discovers a new way of living outside society’s rules. By contrast, *Totem*’s version entirely narcotizes this climax and resorts to a verbal solution focusing on a naïve, childlike, jerky, and paternalistic reaction of the male character, who simply comments on the blackened vagina by exclaiming: “*Che mondo sconosciuto!* [What an unknown world!].”

It is possible that the censorial intervention in the 1998 translation was impacted by the seizure of Miguel Àngel Martín’s comic book *Psychopathia Sexualis*, edited by Jorge Vacca’s Topolin Edizioni and published the same year. It was charged with being an offence to public decency and an instigation to paedophilia by an Italian magistrate in 1996–1997. The link between *Psychopathia Sexualis*’s seizure and *Totem*’s censorial act is an hypothesis, which may explain why the latter’s publisher, Nuova Frontiera, decided to censor particularly graphic images and to sell the comics, wrapped in cellophane with the seal “*V.M ANNI 18*” [X-Rated] at newsstands. Indeed, the subsequent issues of *Totem*’s *Crumb Comics* showed no sign of visual censorship and this translation of “Whiteman meets Bigfoot” is the only case of deliberate censorship in the collection.

In addition to *Totem*, the story was published in Italy on three other occasions. Nineteen years before *Totem*, Italian underground cartoonist and editor Angelo Quattrocchi translated the story in the short-lived underground magazine *RisoAmaro 1* (Crumb, 1979). His translation was reprinted in the anthology *Le Grandi Storie*, published by Malatempora,¹⁶ which contained what Quattrocchi called Crumb’s philosophical comics (Crumb, 1999, p. 1). Although this translation appeared just a year after *Totem*, it does not show signs of overt visual censorship. This is likely because *Le Grandi Storie*, just like *RisoAmaro* in 1979, did not have a mainstream circulation and did not risk (or fear) sanctions. Finally, “Whiteman Meets Bigfoot” was retranslated by Comicon and, in this case as well, no visual censorship is present (Crumb, 2018b). However, as will be demonstrated in the last subsection, despite the differences in period, publisher, and type of publication, all of these editions of

16. Malatempora was an independent publishing house founded in 1998 by activist Angelo Quattrocchi. It focused on countercultural works, from fiction to historical and sociological studies. Publications were mainly sold online and in Italian *centri sociali* [community centres].

“Whiteman Meets Bigfoot” share a common approach to Crumb’s comics: from the early translation by a non-professional translator belonging to the underground Italian milieu, to *Totem*’s censored version and Comicon’s high-quality publication, the translations trivialize to a certain degree Crumb’s original contents, which were often interpreted within the hermeneutic frame of the so-called *commedia sexy all’italiana*.

2.3 Banalization through Translation: The Hermeneutic Frame of the *Commedia Sexy all’Italiana*

The *commedia sexy* [sexy comedy] is a trivial sub-category of the Italian film genre *commedia all’italiana* [Italian-style comedy] that became popular during the 1970s and early 1980s (see Giordano and Aramu, 2000). *Commedia sexy* films feature abundant female nudity and light-hearted comedy, and the social criticism characteristic of the *commedia all’italiana* is underplayed in favour of clichéd storylines filled with flippant humour based on sexual innuendos and slapstick elements. This new cinematographic tradition influenced the proliferation of erotic and pornographic comics throughout the 1970s, with titles such as *Lando* (1973-1984), *Il Tromba* [*The Trumpeter*] (1975-1986) by Edifumetti, and *Il Montatore* [*The Assembler*] (1975-1982) by Ediperiodici. These comics were not conceived as satirical works and were not connected with the underground movement. Plots and protagonists were based on the characters and actors of *commedia sexy* films, such as Lando Buzzanca, who gave his name to the comics, Lando. I argue that the same type of humour found in these films and comic publications can be found in the translations of Crumb’s comic, whose original sexual content has often been rendered with levity and simplicity in Italian.

To contextualize the *commedia sexy* genre within the Italian cultural scene, we need to take a step back. Towards the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, post-war feminist associationism and political activism contributed to a sexual revolution in Italy, which prompted a change in family structure, relationships, and gender roles, in a country strongly inhibited by its deep roots in Roman Catholicism—the state religion until 1984—, its restrictive moral constraints regarding sexual behaviour, and its conservative position on virginity, pre-marital sex, sexual promiscuity, contraception, and marriage. During this period, “the personal became political” and

sexual self-determination turned into a major political goal (Zambelli *et al.*, 2018). In addition to increasing sexual freedom, Italy made progress in the area of civil rights: a referendum to legalize divorce (1970), a law regulating abortion (1978), the reform of family law to decriminalize adultery and make men and women equal partners under the law (1975).

This new climate of liberation also contributed to loosening the stigma around the representation of sexuality in the media. For the first time, references to sexuality were no longer taboo, even in films and television. Porn and explicit sex scenes were still forbidden, but partial nudity and soft-core scenes became part of mainstream show business. The *commedia sexy* was a clear manifestation of this trend and, in a way, even helped debunk the stigma around sexuality in Italy. However, the popularization of sex in mainstream media did not automatically turn it into an accepted topic of conversation. The *commedia sexy* still relied on stereotyped roles and narratives created by and aimed at a heterosexual male gaze: men were the protagonists and the audience. Female characters played standardized roles (wife, mother, daughter, student, teacher, prostitute, mistress), which were determined by their position with respect to the male counterpart (Manzoli, 2012; Rigola, 2019). They were the object of the protagonists' sexual desire: humorous adventures frequently resulted in failed attempts rather than actual sexual intercourse. In this respect, even masculinity had to fit into a pre-defined role: the main character had to be awkward, childish, naïve, with a voyeuristic attitude towards female bodies and an infantilized conception of sex. With their fixed roles, recurring bawdy storylines, and erotic humour, these comedies presented a palatable—even reassuring—version of sexual liberation, devoid of a subversive spirit and disengaged from political claims and countercultural stances. By avoiding anti-conformist *boutades* and in-depth reflections on the theme of sex, this genre promoted a spectacularization of nudity and the sexual sphere within the boundaries of trash culture—in ways resembling the US media “backlash” against feminist progress described by Faludi (1991).

Returning to the translation of Crumb's comix, the abundant sex scenes and female nudity, together with the presence of male characters embodying “losers” rather than traditionally positive male roles, may have favoured the association of these works with the all-Italian *commedia sexy* tradition. In several Italian editions of

Crumb's comix, the source texts seem to have been interpreted and consequently modified according to this hermeneutic frame. For instance, in this tradition, male characters use a nonstandard verbal register, coupled with basic wordplays, exaggerations, and a childlike vocabulary reflecting an infantilized idea of sexuality. Alvaro Vitali's Pierino, the protagonist of an eponymous series of *commedia sexy* films, is perhaps the most famous example of an adult character speaking and acting like a "naughty boy." In this sense, a sentence like "*Che mondo sconosciuto!*" [What an unknown world!] in response to a graphic representation of a vagina would be the type of exclamation expected from Pierino rather than one of Crumb's characters.

If we look at the same panels from "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot" in the three translations, we can see that all three abound with terms and expressions linked to the *commedia sexy*. An example is the use of augmentatives (Table 2).

Table 2. The Translation of Crumb's "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot"—part 2

Panel	Original version (p. 16)	<i>Totem's</i> Translation (p. 67)	<i>RisoAmaro/</i> <i>Malatempora's</i> Translation (p. 49)
1	"Spread'em!"	"Apri le coscione!" [Open the big thighs!] (my trans.)	"Apri un po' ste coscione" [Open a bit these big thighs] (my trans.)
4	"Yetti, you're incredible!!!! Ya make me feel like a real man!"	"Cara Yeti, tu sei una forza della natura! Sei una favola!" [Dear Yeti, you are a force of nature! You are a fairytale!] (my trans.)	"Yetina ma sei proprio una gran ficona!!!" [Little Yeti you really are a big snatch!] (my trans.)

For an Italian reader, such augmentatives as "*coscione* [big thighs]" and "*gran ficona* [big pussy, hottie]" immediately evoke titles such as Sergio Martino's 1973 *Giovannona Coscialunga disonorata con onore* [*Giovannona Long-Thigh*]¹⁰—which is also called to mind by the similarity of the *Totem* anthology's front cover to the film's poster—and Alessandro Metz's 1981 *Pierino il Fichissimo* [*Pierino the Coolest*].

Whereas the *commedia sexy* frame is magnified, other important elements are irremediably censored. For example, in panel 4, *RisoAmaro/Malatempora's* translation overlooks that the character also exclaims: "Ya make me feel like a real man!" The sentence is

missing in *Totem* as well, where Yetti's wildness and bond with nature are emphasized and "*Sei una favola!* [You are a fairytale!]" provides an ecstatic though frivolous echo to "incredible." That said, the erasure of the original sentence silences the fact that Whiteman appears to feel like a real man only through the release of his sexual desire made possible by a creature as wild as Yetti. In contrast, *RisoAmaro*/Malatempora amplifies Whiteman's naivety and childish vulgarity, thus undervaluing the significance of the sexual act.

It should be stressed that, while *RisoAmaro*'s translation dates back to 1979, when the success of the *commedia sexy* was at its peak, even Comicon's recent translation (Crumb, 2018), which aims to provide a new, philologically accurate version of Crumb's comics, fails to resist associating his stories with the *commedia sexy*—an association which has remained ingrained in the minds of Crumb's Italian readers since the 1970s (Table 3).

Table 3. The Translation of Crumb's "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot"—part 3

Panel	Original version (p. 16)	Comicon's Translation (p. 59)
4	"She gets wet fast!"	"Va' come si bagna!" [Look how she gets wet!] (my trans.)

In panel 4, "*Va*" is the imperative form of "*guarda*" [look], which is used in Italy's Northern dialects, especially Milan's. The expression evokes the 1996 Italian comedy film *Il barbiere di Rio* [*The Barber of Rio*], directed by Giovanni Veronesi and starring one of the most famous Italian comedians, Diego Abatantuono. One of the film's catch phrases is "*Brasile! Un sogno che si avvera. [...] Va' che roba, va' che baia! Va' che culi!* [Brazil! A dream come true. [...] Look at it, look at the bay...look at the asses!]," pronounced by Abatantuono's character as he looks at bikini-clad women on the beach. Surprisingly, even the film's poster, displaying Abatantuono's character with two Brazilian women wearing bikinis, vaguely resembles the book cover chosen by Comicon, in which Crumb is accompanied by two female yetis. Likewise, the film is based on a similar storyline, in which a depressed and dissatisfied barber travels to Brazil where he finally finds happiness and love after leaving the greyness, the stress, and the duties of city-life behind. This evokes Whiteman's quest for freedom and, possibly, the translator was influenced by the Italian reference when translating the story. Although this is clearly an hypothesis,

what is certain is that the original text is somehow banalized and depoliticized by making Whiteman speak like a middle-class man from Milan.

Provided they were framed as light-hearted *commedia sexy*, Crumb's comix were probably not perceived as harmful. In fact, five out of seven covers of *Totem's* volumes display voluptuous women and explicit references to sex, as do the anthologies *Io e Le Donne* [*The Women and I*] in Acme's (1992b) and Mare Nero's (2000) editions, Blue Press's *La Diavolessa* [*The She-Devil*] (1994a), and particularly Tipografia La Nuova Idea's anthology *Le Orribili Ossessioni* (1981a), which is a translation of *Les Horribles Obsessions de Robert Crumb* (1974) by French publisher Actuel Novapress. The latter makes clear that the focus of the collection is sex, as indicated by the word "sesso" [sex] on the top right corner of the cover, inscribed on a ribbon with female breasts on the back, as well as by the selection of sex-related pictures from Crumb's "Whiteman" and "Look out Girls!! The Grabbies are Coming!!" Several caption boxes further stress the point with such exclamations as: "*Numero speciale dedicato ai palpatori!* [Special issue dedicated to the gropers!]," "*Riservato agli adulti maggiorenni e vaccinati* [Reserved for grown and vaccinated adults]," "*Un nuovo libro di comix // che vi offre...//....avventure palpitanti! HA HA HA!* [A new comix book that offers you... palpitating stories! Hahaha!]."

Le Orribili Ossessioni includes some of the most disturbing comix by Crumb, tackling such issues as molestation, paedophilia, zoophilia, defloration, incest, rape, and gang-rape. While *linus* displayed a censorial attitude towards such characters as Mr. Natural, *Le Orribili Ossessioni* translated under the title "Sulla Strada" (1981b) one of the most controversial stories about the guru, "Mr. Natural On the Bum Again," originally from *Mr. Natural* 1 (1970b) and later republished in *The Complete Crumb Comics* 7 (1991, pp. 99-107). The story revolves around the guru having fantasies about and then oral sex with a baby, which in the end causes his arrest by a police officer who charges him with paedophilia. The Italian version makes verbal additions to show Mr. Natural in even more perverse terms, when he refers to the baby girl as "*porcellino* [piggy]" (1981b, p. 59) and "*piccola baldracca* [little slut]" (p. 60). In the original, the baby is never insulted and, in general, Mr. Natural talks in a more polite register than the rest of Crumb's characters.

These additions, which serve to make Mr. Natural talk like one of the characters from the *commedia sexy*, are only a few examples of *Le Orribili Ossessioni*'s tendency to simplify, narcotize, and trivialize Crumb's stories. More broadly, the anthology seems to willingly modify the source text to make Crumb's comics fit the frame of "newsstand" comic (and comical) pornography based on *commedia sexy* humour, with characters' dialogues resembling a filmic script for an Italian comedy played by such actors as Lino Banfi, Pippo Franco or Alvaro Vitali pursuing Edwige Fenech or Gloria Guida. Theo Hermans maintains that "all translation implies a certain degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose" (1985, p. 11). In the present case, the purpose of publications such as *Le Orribili Ossessioni* is to render Crumb's stories palatable for a market share of readers looking for a US version of *Lando's* comics. While Milano Libri censored smut, many other Italian translations filtered it through the *commedia sexy* genre. The latter operation represents the flip side of the same censorial coin with respect to the overt narcotization of Crumb's poetics and politics.

Conclusions

This paper represents a first step towards casting new light on the interpretation and translation of underground comix in Italy, focusing on Robert Crumb's sex-themed comics. The case study proves particularly effective in pinpointing trends in the translation of these subversive works into Italian. As was demonstrated, several publishers avoided or even refused to translate graphic content, with mainstream publications selecting less problematic stories and characters (e.g., Fritz the Cat), and underground publishers focusing, rather, on Crumb's political comics (e.g., Savelli's *Fallo!*). Contrary to these tendencies, such alternative publishers as *Stampa Alternativa* prioritized his more extreme and irreverent comix, precisely with the aim to shock the audience and appeal to an Italian underground readership. Examples of explicit visual censorship in newsstand publications were also analyzed, specifically the removal of a panel in *linus's* translation of "Mr. Natural" and the blackening of genitalia in *Totem's* translation of "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot," accompanied by the mitigation of sex-based verbal contents.

Moreover, the study revealed a tendency towards a subtler form of *indirect* censorship, more frequent and often used in tandem with explicit censorship. In several translations, Crumb's comix were

stripped of their original provocative political value, which resulted in a comical and superficial hermeneutic reading influenced by the cinematographic tradition of *commedia sexy all'italiana*, an influence obviously absent in the original. Translators were either unable or unwilling to translate the complexity, irreverence, and antagonistic message of Crumb's comix. They often neglected the ideological value behind certain stories and opted for more familiar hermeneutic frames, which could potentially attract a wider audience: as we saw, the translation of "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot," a story denouncing middle-class repression and commodity fetishism in favour of an unrestricted life in the margin, became a wildlife version of a typical *commedia sexy*. This interpretative frame narcotized, in Eco's terms (2009), more sophisticated signification patterns and themes linked to the representation of sex (the psychoanalytic one, in this case), while magnifying elements akin to bawdy comedy.

Stylistic and content banalization, the erasure of variation in register, and the smoothing out of the author's crudeness avoided the appropriate interpretative frames in ways that resemble deliberate censorship. (Counter-)cultural specificities, in all their multi-layered, subversive, even disturbing nature, are rejected in favour of easier, hence "reassuring" translations that manipulate, trivialize, or simply overlook themes crucial to Crumb's comix. In Italy, sexuality was not condemned *per se* provided it was framed within a comedic genre: the *commedia sexy* was not censored, since obscene material and such comics as *Lando* or *Il Montatore* could easily be purchased at newsstands. By disregarding their denunciatory intentions, Crumb's comix were re-framed according to a light-hearted hermeneutic reading apt to appeal to a public keen to read the naughty adventures of characters like Pierino. The banalization of subversive contents through translation may thus be considered one of the "multifaceted" and "polymorphous" (Billiani, 2009, p. 2) ways in which censorship manifests itself. Indeed, two apparently conflicting tendencies—moral censorship and manipulation of obscenity—seem to combine to silence potentially controversial sexual and political content, while a bawdy yet harmless comedic dimension is amplified.

In Italy, the accurate transmission of Crumb's comix represents a missed opportunity due to the translators' inability to make them available, in all their complexity, to a wide Italian readership. This paper advocates the need to approach underground comix from a new, more informed perspective, as well as the need for further

in-depth research to cast light on their twisted relationship with censorship which, as shown, is not limited to institutional policies, but also involves the translating, editing, publishing, and distribution of these works.

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