This thesis’s aim is to introduce the contemporary Austrian comic book author Nicolas Mahler and his work to an English-speaking readership. A background of the German comic book genre prefaces a discussion about Nicolas Mahler and his professional career. The central section of this study will be devoted to a close analysis of two of Nicolas Mahler’s works, Der Weltverbesserer (2014) and Franz Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine (2014). For my analysis of these works, I explore Linda Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation, Roland Barthes’s narratology and Brian McFarlane’s notion of enunciation. These theories aid in unpacking Nicolas Mahler’s style and examining how he adapts works of German literary classics into the comic book genre. My thesis places Nicolas Mahler and his comic books within the tradition of the German literary context as well as within the study of contemporary German-language comic books.
This thesis is dedicated to all of those who love to read comic books.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Christina Guenther, for supporting me on this endeavor. This thesis would not have been possible without your wisdom, insight and, above all, patience. I would also like to thank my wife for supporting and motivating me; I could not have done it without you.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis introduces Nicolas Mahler (*1969), an award winning contemporary Austrian comic book author and analyzes two of his works, *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine* (2014) and *Der Weltverbesserer* (2014). Both of the works represent creative adaptations and, thus, reinterpretations of canonized literary authors into the comic book genre. By utilizing theories of adaptation\(^1\) as articulated by Linda Hutcheon, Roland Barthes’s narratology as well as Brian McFarlane’s notion of enunciation,\(^2\) this study will examine how Nicolas Mahler adapts German literary classics into his comic books.

In 1985, Will Eisner defined the comic book broadly as a “unique aesthetic of sequential art, as a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art form and literary form that deals with the argument of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (5). Essentially, the collections of sequenced images drawn within panels that include text narrating the events create a comic book. This holds true for several umbrella terms that are often used when describing this genre, such as the comic strip, comic book,\(^3\) graphic novel, or cartoon.\(^4\) Comic strips describe comics from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The term “comic book” takes hold in the 1930s until the 1980s when the introduction of the term “graphic novel” was used to elevate the genre to a more serious literary form.

Nicolas Mahler’s work can be described as comic books, graphic novels and comic strips rather than cartoons and need to be considered within the tradition of comic books in the German literary context. Now over one-hundred-and-seventy years old, the genre has been experiencing a

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1 Linda Hutcheon frames adaptation through three modes of engagement: “telling, showing and interacting,” with a story (27).
2 The notion of enunciation is used to describe the nontransferable elements an adaptation gains from its new artistic medium.
3 Manga could also be considered here but the term is used specifically to describe Japanese comic books.
4 In Austria and Germany, cartoons are also grouped into the comic book genre. For this thesis however, Mahler will only be discussed within the framework of comic books, comic strips, or graphic novels and not as a cartoonist.
golden age as more publications from more publishers are stepping into the limelight. German comic book authors are becoming more popular within the literary mainstream and many are winning not only comic book awards but also literary awards as well. This holds true for Nicolas Mahler as he has won more than six awards already with his most recent one being the *Preis der Literaturhäuser*\(^5\) awarded to him at the Leipzig book fair in March 2015. He can be considered one of the most prominent contemporary German-speaking Austrian comic book authors currently being published – who bridges the gap between comic books and canonized literature with his thought-provoking literary adaptations.

This thesis will be organized into five interrelated parts. A brief history of the German comic book genre will be provided first. This will help place Nicolas Mahler’s work within the context of the German-language comic genre. In the first chapter, I will provide an introduction to Nicolas Mahler himself. An attempt to consolidate an overview of the author’s works and awards will be provided along with insight about the author through the aid of interviews and literary reviews. In the second chapter, Nicolas Mahler’s comic book adaptation of *Der Weltverbesserer* (2014), a play by Thomas Bernhard of the same title, will be analyzed. This study will provide an example of how Mahler adapts literary texts and thereby creates a new type of dramatic comic. Key concepts and terms like “adaptation’s dual nature,” “cardinal functions,” “the notion of enunciation,” “emanata contrast,” and “sans paroles panels” will be defined to explain how Mahler creates his new type of comic. The third chapter will provide an in-depth examination of Mahler’s autobiographical comic book *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine* (2014) and showcase his comic books’ so-called alienation effects, a special feature of his work. The comic has no plot but rather represents a collection of

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\(^5\) Award of the literature houses.
assorted comic strips where Nicolas Mahler adapts a caricature of himself, or what I will call an avatar, and involves the character within various scenarios. The main aim of these two chapters will be, thus, to showcase two competing types of comic books that Nicolas Mahler typically produces and how Mahler utilizes adaptation and various narrative techniques in these comic books.

This thesis represents a contribution to the study of comic books in the contemporary German and Austrian literary context. My study of Mahler’s comic style and the panel layout is based on American comic studies and graphic artist Mort Walker’s *Lexicon of Comicana* (1980), as well as Kurin Kukkonen’s *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* (2013).

**History of the German Comic Book Genre**

As early as 1844, weekly satirical comic strips were being published in Munich. Kaspar Braun and Friedrich Schneider established themselves as the most popular publisher at that time with *Fliegende Blätter*, a bourgeois satirical weekly magazine, and a large number of humoristic satirical magazines soon followed such as *Kladderadatsch* (1848), *Der Wahre Jacob* (1879), *Meggendorfer Blätter* (1889) and *Simplicissimus* (1886). The comics, or what German comic historian Andreas C. Knigge calls “Bildergeschichtenbücher” (38) [picture-story books], include Heinrich Hoffman’s 1847 *Struwwelpeter* and Wilhelm Busch’s famous work *Max und Moritz* in 1865 (38). The latter became the name of the most significant literary prize for German comic book authors established in 1984 by the International Comic Shows Erlangen.

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6 The holdings at the Unipark library at the University of Salzburg contained only a single shelf on the comic book genre; they were all American textbooks found under the American literature section. The only secondary source found in German was at Salzburg’s main library. It was the book by Andreas C. Knigge entitled *Comic Lexikon* (1988). It was somewhat outdated and only included three pages about German comic book history; the 528 page textbook was mostly about French or American comic book authors and their works. The few pages about German comic book history however did provide a wealth of insight to the early pioneering authors and books of the German comic book genre.
After World War I, comic books in German context primarily consisted of children’s books in cheap paperback print. Comics, such as Die Blaubandwoche (1925), Der heitere Fridolin (1928), Dideldum (1929), and Lurchi (1937) were drawn and written by early German comic artists that include Albert Schäfer-Ast, Otto Waffenschmied and Emmerich Huber. In 1926 the Austrian comic books entitled Kiebitz, Papagei, and Der Schmetterling by Hans Steinberg appeared, followed by Globi by Robert Lips in 1935 in Switzerland (Knigge 38-39). Around the same time, a series of long running prints started to appear in daily newspapers and illustrations. The most popular in Germany was Vater und Sohn by Erich Ohser in 1934 and Ferdinand Barlog’s Abenteuer der 5 Schreckensteinen in 1937 from the Berliner Illustrierten Zeitung. Also, Martha Bertina and Bählamm published Sieh mal da, die Omama in the Frankfurter Illustrierten Blatt in 1940 (Knigge 38-39). The first German-language daily comic strip debuted with Ladislaus Kmoch’s Tobis Seicherl in 1930 in the Austrian newspaper Das Kleine Blatt.

American comics were rarely published at this time in Germany, Austria or Switzerland. One of the first to enter the German-speaking market however was the Micky Maus Zeitung that the Swiss publisher Bollmann started in 1937. These comic books only had eighteen editions during its initial publication but have become a staple on shelves in book stores in these countries today (Knigge 39).

Nonetheless, the Second World War represents a clear break in the history of German-language comics. In 1944 some of the last satirical comic strips were published in Lustige Blätter and Fliegende Blätter in Germany. They reflected Nazi ideologies and were used almost entirely as printed propaganda. Others include Kladderadatsch and Simplicissimus. These comic strips
contained only caricatures of Allied leaders, overt gags of enemy countries, apolitical jokes, and a lot of anti-Semitic material (Bytwerk).

After the war, the first German comic was published by Manfred Schmidt in 1947 entitled *Bilderbuch für Überlebende* but the utter destruction that the war had created forced numerous small publishers abroad. Danish publisher Gutengerhus, under the corporate name Ehapa, introduced *Micky Maus* back into the German-speaking market in 1951 (Knigge 39-40). Shortly thereafter in 1952, more publishers were following suite; publishers such as Allerpress from Copenhagen and Editions Mondials from Paris or Der Serieförlagt from Stockholm started printing comic strips in German (Knigge 39-40). It is important to note that even though comic books were being produced in German by a wide variety of international publishers, they were only sold in the Allied controlled zones of West Germany, West Berlin, and Austria.7

In 1953 the first German corporation to print comics was established. Rolf Kauka founded Kauka-Verlag in Munich where he published his work in the booklet entitled *Till Eulenspiegel*. This led to the now famous *Fix und Foxi* comic strip characters later that year (Knigge 39-40). The publisher Bastei took on its first activities in the comic genre in 1958 with the comics of *Felix* and *Pony* (Knigge 40). Also, the paperback novel publisher Walter Lehning brought *Akim und Sigurd* to the market as well as *Sigmund*, drawn by Hansrudi Wäscher. These successes continued and helped create other series for the publisher: *Nick* (1958), *Tibor* (1959) and *Falk* (1960) to name a few.

Other interesting German comic series were released in magazines during the 1950s. Manfred Schmidt drew *Nick Knatterton* for the magazine *Quick* in 1950. Reinhold Escher wrote *Mecki* for the magazine *Hör Zu* in 1951. Carol Fischer wrote *Oskar der Familienvater* for the

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7 There is currently little information about comic book publication in the Soviet controlled East Germany.

After the comic boom of the 1950s, the market had a readjustment. In the 1960s and 1970s works from the incorporated publishing houses of Kauka-Verlag, Ehapa, Bastei, and Conder were sold and divided exclusively among other foreign comic book publishers. In 1967 Carlsen-Verlag started to actively publish the *Tim und Struppi* series – a successful adaptation and translation of the famous Franco-Belgian comic series *Les Aventures de Tintin* (1929). The magazine *Zach* printed Dieter Klaenbach’s series *Turi & Tolk* (1967). Dieter Klaenbach’s later became one of the most successful German comic authors in the German comic genre through the end of the 1980s. Other notably successful German comic authors during this era include Matthias Schultheiss, Birger Throin Grave, Chris Scheuer, Gerhard Seyfried, and Brösel (aka Rötger Feldmann).

Since the early 1990s, notwithstanding the unification of East and West Germany, the German-speaking comic market grew. In 1991, for example, there were only six-hundred-and-seven comics published by about ten different publishers (Harmsen). Most of these titles came from foreign markets, namely the United States, and were translated for the German-speaking comic market. Only 17.6% of the comics at that time were written, drawn and published in Germany by German authors. Since 2008, however, there are now over eighty original German comic book publishers (Harmsen). Some of the biggest are Carlsen-Verlag, Egmont-Ehapa-Verlag, Mosaik-Verlag, Avant-Verlag, Reprodukt Verlag, Comicsplus-Verlag, Edition 52, Tokyopop-Verlag, Gringo Comics-Verlag, and Publikumsverlag (Harmsen).
Today, the institution of comics in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are well established with over three decades of festivals, events, award and trade shows. It is very common to find a comic book section in most book stores across these countries. The most popular yearly events include the Internationaler Comic-Salon Erlangen (started in 1984 in Erlangen, Germany), the Comic Festival München (started in 2007 in Munich, Germany), Comic Festival Hamburg (started in 2006 in Hamburg, Germany), Next-Comic-Festival Linz (established in 2009 in Linz, Austria), and Comix-Festival Femetto (established in 1992 in Luzern, Switzerland). These events draw anywhere between 25,000 (Ristau and von Törne) to upwards of 50,000 (“History of Fumetto”) attendees each year. The growing admiration for comic books in the German-speaking market was reflected at the 2015 Vienna Comix convention in Vienna, Austria. It had to extend its operations to a two-day event due to the increasing volume of participants after nearly twenty years of taking place during a single afternoon.

Considering the tradition and growing fandom of the German comic book genre, it is surprising that little has been written about the genre’s current star, Nicolas Mahler. His books are as prolific as the avatar he draws of himself, yet there is a noticeable paucity of scholarly articles about Nicolas Mahler or even about the contemporary Austrian comic genre entirely. The academic obscurity of Mahler and the Austrian comic genre in general represents a challenge in engaging Mahler’s work. This study is one of the first studies in English of Nicolas Mahler. It examines Mahler in the context of the emerging literary field of Austrian and German comics. In the following chapter, an introduction of Mahler will showcase him as a literary author as well as an apt entrepreneur.
CHAPTER I: THE AUSTRIAN COMIC BOOK AUTHOR NICOLAS MAHLER

Born in 1969, Nicolas Mahler currently lives and works in his hometown of Vienna, Austria. His comic book career, according to Mahler, started while he worked in the video rental store “Videobox” in Vienna (“Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber” 34/1). This is where Mahler began to hone his interpretive skills, build a résumé of cultural references and create daily strips that were later widely published in German, Austrian and Swiss newspapers and magazines such as Die Zeit, NZZ am Sonntag, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung and in the Titanic (“Suhrkamp Insel”). Aside from a few comical strips of his own doing, little has been written about his childhood. We know, however, that he is an autodidact without a tertiary education. According to his professional website, Nicolas Mahler has created over fifty comic books, five cartoons, numerous prints, radio plays and even illustrated a textbook for teachers in the past twenty-five years. One of his first comic strips, Brunfts Bunte Bändchen, was self-published between 1996 and 1997 while his second comic strip book du falott, baby! (1999) was published by the small publishing house called Edition Brunft Verlag in Vienna (“MAHLER~museum”).


Since his first publications and the success of Lone Racer and Flaschko, Mahler has been very productive and in the span of his career thus far; he has published and illustrated about an average of two books a year, creating many different comic books that could be categorized into distinct sub-genres of comics. Examples of these are his adaptive or dramatic comic books, autobiographical comic books, his comic anthologies, comic strip books, and even a superhero comic book. More specifically, his adaptive comic books are adaptations of well-known literary
works that Mahler has reduced into the comic book form. They are all published by Suhrkamp Verlag. Some of his popular comic books from Suhrkamp are *Alice in Sussex* (2013) and *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (2013). The autobiographical comic books are collections of strip chapters following various themes, dilemmas or events that seem to have occurred to Nicolas Mahler who represents himself through his avatar in the panels. Popular examples of this sub-genre of autobiographical comic books are *Die Zumutungen der Moderne* (2007), *Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber* (2007), and *Pornografie und Selbstmord* (2010). A third comic book form that Mahler uses is a comic collaborative anthology, collective works by not only Mahler but by other Austrian and European comic book authors. Here a comic strip or a few panels by Mahler are arranged around another author’s text. Works such as *Dick Boss* (2010) or *Perpetuum* (2008) fall into this category.

Mahler also published anthologies of his previously published works. They are collections of unconnected and unrelated comedic joke panels that do not tell a story or have a plot. Instead, they provide repeated punch lines in cornered-off panels for the readers’ enjoyment. The most recent publications of this type of comic are from Edition Moderne and include works such as *Mein Therapeut ist ein Psycho* (2013), *Die Smalltalkhölle* (2014), and *Was Fehlt Uns Denn?* (2014). Finally, Mahler also published one superhero comic book. The work entitled *Engelmann: Der gefallene Engel* (2010) is his only superhero comic book to date and is a metatextual satire that makes fun of superhero comics through a superhero comic.

While Mahler has many different publications and types of comic books, there is a lack of any complete listing of his published works. Nearly twenty different publishers mention his individual works which have been published into other languages besides German as well. Even
the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek\(^8\) fails to list all of Mahler’s works due to the linguistic borders his works cross. Most of the lists found on popular websites such as Mahler’s own professional one or on those of his publishers’ only list fragmented summaries of his publications.\(^9\) This inconvenience is neither special nor rare for a recently famous author but it does make tracking down more of Mahler’s work troublesome for a potential readership.

Nevertheless, his international fame has grown quite rapidly and with it, his exposure to potential publishers abroad. In fact, all of his most acclaimed work has been published abroad, that is to say, outside of his native country of Austria. Currently, his main publishers are all in Germany, namely Carlsen-Verlag, Reprodukt-Verlag and Suhrkamp-Verlag in Berlin and Hamburg. Other notable publishers of Mahler’s work in Europe are: Edition Modern in Zurich Switzerland, B.ü.l.B. Commix in Geneva, Switzerland, L’ampoule in Paris, France, Sequence in Prague, Czechia, and Kultura Gniewu in Warsaw, Poland (“MAHLER~museum”). He also has publishers in North America such as Édutuibs de la Pastèque in Montreal, Canada, and Top Shelf Productions based in Marietta, Georgia, U.S.A. The international publication of his comic scenarios has garnered quite a few honors as well.

Mahler has won six awards and was nominated an additional two times for his comic books. The first came in 1999 from ICOM or the Interessenverband Comic in Essen, Germany, where he won the ICOM Sonderpreis for his exceptional work in *Flaschko* and *TNT: Eine Boxerstory* (1999) (“Independent Comic Preis 1999”). This award helped solidify his position amongst other German-speaking comic book authors and put his work on the map. In 2004,

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8 The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek is Germany’s national library, similar to the Library of Congress in the United States. One of its main roles is to categorize, collect, and archive all the works that are published in German. The library currently lists only thirty-nine original comic books by Nicolas Mahler.

9 For example, *Lone Racer* has been published by Edition Brunft (original version, 1999), L’assocation (French version, 2002), Top Shelf (English version, 2006), Kultura Gniewu (Polish version, 2010), and Reprodukt (German version, 2012). There are five different editions from five different publishers of one comic book. Mahler has some listed as different books and some absent from his own list entirely.
Mahler’s autobiographical comic book *Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber* was nominated for a Max-und-Moritz award for being the best comic publication at the International Comics Show in Erlangen, Germany. In 2006 Mahler finally won the prestigious Max-und-Moritz prize for having the best comic written in German for *Das Unbehagen* (2005). This would not be the only instance in which Mahler would win the Max-und-Moritz prize though. He later won it for having the best comic strip in 2008 for his *Flaschko* comic strips and again in 2010 for being the best comic artist writing in German (“Nominees/Winners 1984”). Mahler was nominated for yet another Max-und-Moritz award in 2012 for his work *Alte Meister*, a comic book adaption of Thomas Bernhard’s work of the same title (“Nominees/Winners 1984”).

Most recently, he was awarded the Preis der Literaturhäuser during the Leipzig Book Fair in March 2015, which officially canonizes him as an author of literature rather than only of comic books (“Preis der Literaturhäuser 2015”). This has a profound effect in terms of his literary classification. Although all of his works either work primarily with the combination of text and picture, and sometimes only pictures, it is hard to argue that he is merely a comic book artist or a comic book author. The interviews reflect Mahler’s perspective on challenges with regard to the status of his literary work in Austria. Interestingly, for him, the real value of comics in Austria persists as a continuous issue.

Interests with Nicolas Mahler

In an interview conducted in September of 2014 by Martin Reiterer of the *Wiener Zeitung*, who identifies himself as a Germanist and cultural publisher specialized in the genre of comics, Mahler was asked quite bluntly about the title of his classification as either an artist or author. “Was ist schwieriger: Einem Vertreter des Kunstbetriebs zu erklären, dass bei Comics...”
auch die narrative Ebene unerlässlich ist, oder einem Vertreter des Literaturbetriebs, dass man auch die visuelle Ebene nicht weglassen kann?”

The issue of whether or not Mahler’s comic books are either an art form or a literary form addresses an assumption that Mahler has found issue with again and again. Mahler understands the conflict between picture and text as an expression of deep fission within the art and literary community: “Also mit einem Vertreter des Literaturbetriebs könnte ich darüber reden. Mit einem Vertreter des Kunstbetriebs hingegen gar nicht. Die sind so eingenommen von ihrem Urteil”

Mahler clarifies, thus, a discussion of his work as a literary representation is easier and more plausible for him than a discussion of his work within the context of the visual arts. In other words, Mahler prefers to place his work in the category of literature. Notably, of course, Mahler’s latest prize by the Literaturhäuser in March 2015 shows that he is finally being considered a literary author.


Mahler’s comments about his comic book *Lone Racer* are interesting. Mahler jumps rather quickly from high to low in his response, something that sheds light not only on his self-deprecating humor,

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10 What is more difficult: To explain to a representative of art that the narrative level in comics is also indispensable, or to a representative of literature that you also cannot leave out the visual level? (All translations are my own.)

11 Well, I could discuss it with a representative of literature. With a representative of art, I cannot. They are so biased with regard to their opinion.

12 Yea, I was on vacation in Paris and there I discovered L’Association. I sent them my first comic, *Lone Racer*. And they took it immediately! In Austria you don’t even get an answer...
but more importantly, on his attitude towards his career. Rather than discussing the success *Lone Racer* brought him, Mahler brings up his sentiments about the comic genre in Austria.

Although, he was first published in France and then in Switzerland and Germany, it is important to note he did not have a single comic book published by an Austrian publisher until Luftschacht-Verlag published *Längen und Kürzen* and *Perpetuum* in 2008.\(^{13}\) Mahler had to leave Austria in order to start his career in comic books. Initially, Mahler was only able to get published in cultures that already had a long-standing tradition of comic books as a prominent literary form.

Mahler addresses the issue when Martin Reiterer asks, “Und wie kam der Sprung ins Ausland?”\(^{14}\) Mahler answers:

> Durch das Tief, das danach gekommen ist. Als Kommerzzeichner hat es auch nicht mehr funktioniert. Zu dem Zeitpunkt gab es im deutschsprachigen Raum einen absoluten Tiefpunkt, was Comics angeht. 1998 habe ich mit Heinz Wolf den Selbstverlag gegründet. Doch das war eine Enttäuschung. Das hängt mir bis heute noch nach, wie schlecht mich die Buchhändler behandelt haben.\(^ {15}\)

(“Tragödie ist mir zu fad” 1)

Mahler’s irritation towards the Austrian market of the late 1990s reflects a deep-seated resentment about how comic books were perceived in the Austrian context. Only a few books of his have been published in Austria and there are absolutely no awards or nominations to speak of.

\(^{13}\) *Längen und Kürzen* (2008) was for a number of years the only comic book solely authored by Nicolas Mahler that was published in Austria (by Luftschacht Verlag). The second publication, *Perpetuum* (2008), was a collaborative effort by thirteen other Austrian comic book authors about the current state of the comic book scene in Austria. His 2015 work *dachbodenfund* is only the second official monograph issued by the Austrian publisher.

\(^{14}\) And how did the jump abroad happen?

\(^{15}\) Through the depth that has come up afterwards. As a comic drawer it wasn’t working anymore. At this time the German-speaking world hit an absolute bottom about what comics concern. In 1998 I founded a publishing house with Heinz Wolf. That was a disappointment. That still lingers with me to this day just how bad the book stores treated me.
from an Austrian institution, something that Mahler has attributed to the lack of respect toward
the genre. In response to Reiterer’s question, “Respektlos?”16 Mahler answers, “Ja, sehr. Die
Respektlosigkeit ist in Wien schon sehr groß. Das ist mir erst im Ausland aufgefallen”17
(“Tragödie ist mir zu fad” 1). Incidentally, in his own art, he showcases this disrespectfulness.
He represents Austrian close-mindedness in some of his early autobiographical comic books
such as Kunsttheorie vs. Frau Goldgruber (2007) and Die Zumutungen der Moderne (2007),
both published by Reprodukt. They are award-winning works that mirror the conservative
disrespectfulness with which Austria treated him and the comic book genre.

In Mahler’s eyes, this lack of understanding for comics has left Austria without a defined
comic book industry. The constant debate whether or not his work belongs to the literary genre
forced Mahler to publish outside of Austria, in countries that have an established taste for comics
as literature rather than only pop art or popular culture. Even though book stores across Austria
dedicate shelves to comic books, they are usually hidden in a cellar or relegated to a corner. The
sections where they may be found are labeled with English loan words such as “Graphic
Novels,” or “Comic Books,” rather than the German word “Bildgeschichtenbücher.” Other
countries around Europe and Asia already have a particular term in their language for the
genre.18

In another interview conducted in 2012 by Philip Dulle of Profil, the similar notion of
Austrian “Respektlosigkeit” is brought up, too, but reveals more about the German comic genre

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16 Disrespect?
17 Yes, very much so. The disrespectfulness in Vienna is rather great. I noticed it for the first time when I was
abroad.
18 Franco-Belgian comic books are bandes dessinées. Mexico uses Historietas, meaning little stories. Spain calls
them Tebeos. Hungary uses Képregény, a term that literal means picture novel. Japan has Manga, which means
comic, and China has the term 漫画 (Manhua), which means impromptu sketches.
as a whole. The interview discusses the struggles of the comic genre in Germany as well as Austria. Dulle asks, “Sind Comics im Mainstream angekommen?”19 to which Mahler answers, Verkaufsschlager werden Comics bei uns wohl nie sein. Viele Leute haben einfach eine Abscheu gegenüber Zeichnungen. Sie sind ihnen nicht ernsthaft genug. Es gibt noch immer diesen Glauben, dass Druckwerke, die nicht dicht bedruckt und ausufernd sind, nicht tiefgründig sein können. Literaturkritiker haben oft ein Problem mit kurzen, auf das Wesentliche reduzierten Werken.20 („Könnte mich gar nicht verbiegen”)

Staying rather direct and economical in his response, Mahler sums up an argument a non-comic reader in Germany and Austria commonly levels against comic books, namely that comic books cannot have a deep meaning due in part to their rather thin, reduced text. A broad claim considering reductionism and minimalism has a long tradition in art but, in the case of Mahler’s comic books, not in literature.

Mahler’s comments reveal not only the taboo surrounding comics but also his business sense. He recognizes the importance of the literary critic with regard to an author’s marketability and reputation. This notion fosters ideas of a trans-medial press (internet, newspaper, television) that can affect how he is perceived in regards to being a comic literary author.

In a 2012 interview, Phillip Dulle of Profil asks Mahler: “In Österreich haben Sie keinen Ruf?”21 Mahler responds rather bluntly, “In Österreich tut sich nichts! In Deutschland gibt es wenigstens ein paar Comic-Serien in den Feuilletons”22 („Könnte mich gar nicht verbiegen”).

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19 Have comics arrived in the mainstream?
20 Comics will never become best sellers here [in Austria]. A lot of people just don’t like drawings. They are not serious enough for them. There is also still this belief that literary works where the pages aren’t densely packed with words and vast cannot be profound. Literature critics often have a problem with short, reduced-to-the-basics works.
21 Don’t you have a reputation in Austria?
22 It’s not happening in Austria! In Germany there are at least a few comic series on the feature pages.
Mahler reveals his irritation and disappointment by describing his experience with his Austrian readership. For Mahler, Austria is only a market for his works, one that has continuously ignored, misunderstood, and even disrespected him through his career. Mahler states, “Die Menschen kaufen ja nur Sachen, die sie bereits kennen. Literarische Adaptionen oder Biografien eignen sich daher finanziell am ehesten für zeichnerische Bearbeitung. Mit rein fiktiven Geschichten ist das schon schwerer”23 (“Könnte mich gar nicht verbiegen”). From a business perspective, Mahler labels his books as fine fictional stories that are harder to sell than adaptations of literary works or biographical works that many would already be familiar with in Austria. Austrians, simply put, don’t understand comic books. Their trust stagnates because their only focus remains on well-established literary genres.

This trust, however, seems misplaced for Mahler. In answer to Philip Dulle’s question, “Warum funktioniert das Comic-Genre in Österreich nicht?”24 Mahler replies, “Ein Grundübel in Österreich ist, dass man sich hier nichts traut. Dafür gibt es in Zeitungen immer mehr Kolumnen. Launiges aus dem Privatleben des Innenpolitikredakteurs - das finde ich furchtbar. In anderen Ländern würde an dieser Stelle ein Comic stehen”25 (“Könnte mich gar nicht verbiegen”). Foreign countries viewing the comic book genre as a respectable literary form frustrates Mahler. He continues to see opposition at home where there is nothing but praise abroad.

Mahler’s entrepreneurial spirit is articulated clearly in an interview from 2004 with the Comic Book Bin. Mahler explains,

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23 People only purchase things that they already know. Literary adaptations or biographies are financially most suitable for drawn works. With purely fictive stories, it is far more difficult.
24 Why doesn’t the comic genre work in Austria?
25 A basic problem in Austria is that people don’t dare anything. That is why there are always more columns in newspapers. I find weird stuff about the private life of the editor in charge of domestic politics awful. In other countries that would be replaced by a comic strip.
My work is certainly not the stuff bestsellers are made of, but rather what I myself would like to read. Of course the foreign editions are important to me, because in Austria, where I come from, there is absolutely no market for books like mine. The booksellers hate them, and are glad if the 5 copies they got by incident are gone, so they don't have to bother with them no more. Of course, with each book I hope that it really sells well, but it hasn't happened so far. Maybe it needs a little time for my style of drawing to “sink in.” ("Interview with Nicolas Mahler")

Indeed it has truly been just a matter of time as he is now the most popular contemporary German-speaking comic book author and, additionally, the most successful Austrian comic book author, but the issue of publication in Austria continues to persist. Mahler’s opinion provides an interesting insight into the nature of the comic book perspective in Austria. The nuances and originality of his comics expose Austrian stereotypes about the comic book genre but it did not challenge his publications in the least bit. There is already a fan base for his works and recognition from critics, too.

**Literary Reviews**

Reviews of Mahler’s works have appeared primarily in German-speaking media. The most interesting critical insights have appeared in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the Austrian magazine *Falter*, the Goethe Institute site on German comics, and the homepage of the Karikaturmuseum Krems, the only museum with a focus on comic books and caricatures in Austria. The reviews provide an understanding of which of Mahler’s texts have drawn the most attention. Recent German-speaking critics have begun to consider
Mahler’s significance as a pioneer with his comics, both in terms of his literary style and comedic artistic techniques.

The website of the Karikaturmuseum Krems, for instance, provides a brief but comprehensive introduction to Mahler’s style, humor and important qualities. The museum summarizes Mahler’s success as anything but “selbstverständlich” (“Nicolas Mahler. Wer alles liest, hat nichts begriffen”). He is described as a type of “Grenzgänger,” a border crosser between literary and visual art, whose strokes of pen and paper are meticulously stylized and abstract. His humor is considered borderline tragic (“Nicolas Mahler. Wer alles liest, hat nichts begriffen”). Interestingly, the museum curators recognize that he is neither a purely comic artist nor a tragic author although humor is central for Mahler and related to his minimalism. Even since the onset of Mahler’s career with the publication of *Flaschko* (1999), he has engaged consistently with humor in his own unique multifaceted yet minimalistic style. The museum’s synopsis of Mahler’s career is limited to his adaptations of other literary works such as *Alte Meister* (2011). His various other comic books such as *Das Unbehagen* (2005), *SPAM* (2009) or *Engelman: der gefallene Engel* (2010) are, however, rarely mentioned.

Andreas Platthaus, an editor in the “Feuilleton” section in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, provides more insight into Mahler’s style, humor and aim of his work. In his review of another comic book adaptation by Mahler, *Alice in Sussex* (2013), an adaptation of both Lewis Carroll’s 1865 book *Alice in Wonderland* and the Austrian author H.C. Artmann’s 1969 work *Frankenstein in Sussex. Fleiß und Industrie.*., Andreas Platthaus writes:

“Alice in Sussex” keine Adaption, sondern eine Addition.\textsuperscript{26} ("Neuer F.A.Z.-Fortsetzungscomic: Alice, wie sie keiner kennt")

Mahler echoes and transforms these works for a twenty-first century readership. It is a creative and playful disrespect towards higher art that Andreas Platthaus identifies in Mahler’s adaptations and with H.C. Artmann’s twentieth century adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s nineteenth century work, too. We can bear witness in Mahler’s work to a type of intertextual time travel. Indeed, Mahler’s transformations of Thomas Bernhard, Robert Musil and Frank Wedekind can be viewed from a similar additive stance, i.e. in terms of a Derridian supplementary function.\textsuperscript{27} Mahler not only creates a new interpretation but also adds his own flourish to their works with his “unnachahmlichen cartoonesken Stil,” an unmatched and distinctive cartoonish style (Platthaus, “Neuer F.A.Z.-Fortsetzungscomic: Alice, wie sie keiner kennt”).

Andreas Platthaus is viewed as an authority on comics. His reviews of Mahler’s work have been used by many of Mahler’s publishers to advertise and validate Mahler’s own work, such as for \textit{Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften} (2013) or \textit{Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine} (2014). Platthaus writes fairly frequently for the \textit{Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung} in his blog \textit{Comic} about all issues and topics regarding the comic book genre. He also was the editor of Mahler’s \textit{Alte Meister} (2011). In one of his blogs, Platthaus writes about Mahler’s autobiographical comic book \textit{Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine}\textsuperscript{28} and the importance of Mahler’s work and states, “Viel ist darüber gestritten worden, ob [Kafka] Comic Kunst sein kann. Bisher aber nicht mit den Waffen des Comics. Das hat der bekannte Zeichner Nicolas

\textsuperscript{26} Mahler adds twenty-first century irony and mixes it with a Carrollian and an Artmannian mixture along with other ingredients: Voltaire for example. Or Cioran. It seems \textit{Alice in Sussex} is not an adaptation, rather it is an addition.

\textsuperscript{27} The supplementary function is a notion that a substitution of the original is a replacement, which bears traces of the original, but is also something unique. The substituted piece is not the same as the original but enhances it. This is helpful in understanding how Mahler’s interpretations of Bernhard, Musil or Wedekind remain unique.

\textsuperscript{28} Despite the allusion to Franz Kafka, this text represents an autobiographical piece that will be discussed later in the third chapter.
Mahler jetzt mit einer kurzen, provokativen Bilderfolge geändert”\textsuperscript{29} ("Essay in Bildern: Sind Comics Kunst?").

Clearly, Mahler’s comics are powerful and they are far more complex than has been recognized in the typical discussion surrounding comics. Platthaus continues, “[…] natürlich können Comics sowohl Kunst als auch Literatur als auch etwas Eigenes sein – sofern sie nur geglückt sind”\textsuperscript{30} ("Essay in Bildern: Sind Comics Kunst?"). For Platthaus, Mahler falls into a third category. Platthaus’s review identifies the potential of a triple artistic unity within Mahler’s work, namely that comic books can be classified as art, literature and as their own genre at the same time. Through the voice of a comic narrator, Mahler is a writer, but also as an intermediary, who has adapted the works of Thomas Bernhard, Lewis Carrol, H.C. Artmann, Robert Musil and Frank Wedekind for a contemporary readership. Mahler’s works, to Platthaus, represent, thus, not only a new interpretation but also a literary addition. In this way, Mahler’s work truly is unique.

Matthias Schneider, a cultural journalist and curator of film programs and cultural exhibitions about comics at the Goethe Institute Stockholm, focuses more on Mahler’s unique humor rather than his reputation as an artist or a literary figure. Matthias Schneider provides greater insight into the type of world Mahler creates as well as another perspective on Mahler’s comic adaptations. In a review in 2013 Schneider writes:

It is one bizarre world that Nicolas Mahler presents us with in his comic cartoons.

As though viewed through a concave mirror, the Austrian distorts the outer appearance of his protagonists. […] Mahler relishes working with humorous

\textsuperscript{29} One has argued considerably about whether comics can be art, but, until now, without the weapons of comics. That is what the well-known sketch-artist Nicolas Mahler has now changed with a short provocative sequence of pictures.

\textsuperscript{30} […] of course comics can be art as well as literature as well as something its own – so long as they are successful.
exaggeration, the classic stylistic devise of caricature. (“The bizarre world of Nicolas Mahler”)

Schneider’s analogy of a concaved mirror to describe Mahler’s style as a distortive exaggeration contrasts with the description by the curators of the Karikaturmuseum in regards to Mahler’s visual style. Schneider simplifies Mahler’s style significantly. To insist that Mahler, the comic book artist, distorts his characters as an exaggerated comic effect is to argue that only he is the one distorting the characters in the panels. The panels in comic books are a form of interpretative distortion, which are able to be interpreted in another distorted view when observed from the reader’s own perspective, as s/he compares text with image. Interestingly, Schneider does not review Mahler’s adaptive comic books but rather only his earlier comic books such as Flaschko (1999) and Kartochvil (2004). Schneider interprets Mahler’s world in these early comics similarly to Platthaus. He states:

[Nicolas] Mahler, with his quiet and laconic dry humor and stubborn outsider characters, might be regarded as an Aki Kaurismäki of the comic and cartoon world. The Austrian’s pictures, like the images of the Finnish director, hold their own even without colour or words. … [Nicolas Mahler’s] characters are easy victims for the vagaries of the everyday because of their physical particularities. With his Kafkaesque figure by the name of Kratochvil, Mahler has managed to create a unique comic strip that defies classification. (Schneider, “The bizarre world of Nicolas Mahler”)

Schneider’s observations regarding Mahler’s humor, literary style, and story world reflect again on the type of adaptation Mahler invokes with his works. He recognizes Mahler as “a gifted humorist and a master of the quick sketch” and highlights Mahler’s penchant for the
absurd. By likening Mahler to the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, Schneider also puts Mahler’s work in a type of third category that Platthaus struggled to label. Schneider states, “[Mahler’s] protagonists’ stories unravel ad absurdum against banal and Kafkaesque backdrops full of comedy reeking of oppression and effortless poetry” (“The bizarre world of Nicolas Mahler”). Schneider mentions the type of intertextual discourse that aids in Mahler’s narrative, something that is common in many of his works.

In the Austrian magazine *Falter* only a handful of Mahler’s fifty works have been reviewed; most notable are, however, Mahler’s Thomas Bernhard adaptive comic book *Alte Meister* (2011) and *Der Weltverbesserer* (2014). This may be related to Bernhard’s status not only in contemporary German literature but Austrian literature as well. The few other comic books were seemingly chosen at random and oddly enough, not even the book for which Nicolas Mahler won the Max-und-Mortiz prize, *Das Unbehagen* (2005), was reviewed.

In a review of one of Mahler’s graphic novels *Die Zumutungen der Moderne* (2007), Peter Iwaniewicz of *Falter* magazine praises Mahler’s minimalism coupled with a robust sense of humor, warning that anyone who wishes to read it not to do so in public (60). Peter Iwaniewicz emphasizes more Mahler’s humor and style without mentioning the tragic undertone that is significant for the curators of the Karikaturmuseum. For Peter Iwaniewicz, Mahler evokes another artist, a sculptor, “Der Kunstignoranz begegnet Mahler mit lakonischen Texten und Zeichnungen, die bei wohlwollender Betrachtung an Skulpturen von Alberto Giacometti erinnern, in jedem Fall aber ein ‘Das kann ich aber auch ‘provozieren’’”31 (60). The likening of Mahler’s comic art and text to that of one of the most important twentieth-century Swiss sculptors, Alberto Giacometti, whose work is described as “Surrealist” (“Biography Of An

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31 Mahler confronts the ignorance of art with laconic texts and drawings. While these pieces of art vaguely resemble Alberto Giacometti's sculptures, they certainly seem to say, “I could do that, too!”
(Œuvre”), associates Mahler with highbrow culture, art and literature – the very thing that Mahler makes fun of in Die Zumutungen der Moderne.

In other reviews in the magazine Falter, Thomas Ballhausen and Martin Wanko cast Mahler’s Bernhard adaptations in positive terms. Thomas Ballhausen writes about Alte Meister, “Mahlers emblematische Tafelreihe ist die perfekte Entsprechung für Bernhards Abrechnung mit der österreichischen Gesellschaft und Kultur. Entsetzlich und großartig”³² (30). Here the adjective “entsetzlich,” i.e. appalling, is put into a binary opposition to his conjoining term, “großartig,” or splendid. Like Bernhard’s work, Mahler’s, too, includes social criticism that antagonizes the reader. Martin Wanko comments similarly in his review of Der Weltverbesserer. Mahler’s reduced form succeeds in creating a new interpretation, especially with Bernhard’s play. Wanko writes, “Bernhard kann sehr komisch und unglaublich menschlich dargestellt werden vor allem, wenn Mahler zum Stift greift. Der Zeichner schafft Theater für Menschen, die im Prinzip keine Theatergänger sind oder ihren Hintern dazu nicht aufraffen können”³³ (21). The notion of Mahler’s panels bringing theater to people who ordinarily would not be interested in theater is significant. Martin Wanko’s opinion of adapting Bernhard’s comical but unbelievable characters builds an understanding that Mahler’s work is more than just comical but dramatic as well. What all three journalists have in common, although they all review different works by Mahler, is an appreciation for Mahler’s outrageously funny minimalistic socio-cultural criticism that he forms in his adaptations.

³² Mahler’s emblematic paneled sequence is the matches perfectly for Bernhard’s account of Austrian society and culture. Appalling and splendid.
³³ Bernhard can be depicted as a very comical and unbelievably humane above all else whenever Mahler takes hold of his pen. The sketch artist creates theater for people that in principle are not theater-goers or cannot be bothered to make their way to the theatre.
Mahler’s artistic oeuvre is repeatedly described as minimalistic and his adaptations seem to be the most widely acclaimed and reviewed of all his published books. Given his witty and creative engagement with some of the greatest German-speaking writers of the twentieth century, a closer look at a few of Mahler’s adaptations is undoubtedly productive and will provide a better insight into Mahler’s work and success. By providing a close analysis of his adaptive comic book *Der Weltverbesserer* and then, of his autobiographical comic book *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine*, I hope to provide a more complete picture of Mahler, his work, adaptation style and literary significance as a comic author.
Nicolas Mahler’s adaptations have seen the most praise and for good reason. They are where his comic book’s literary and artistic styles converge most clearly. Thomas Bernhard’s Der Weltverbesserer (1980) is Bernhard’s tenth published play and seems a rather random choice on Mahler’s part to transfer into a comic-book adaptation, especially considering that his previous comic adaptation of Alte Meister (1988) in 2011 is one of Bernhard’s most famous works. In addition, Mahler’s comic book version of Alte Meister was also nominated for a Max-und-Mortiz prize in 2012 (“Nominees/Winners 1984”). In his Bernhard adaptations, Mahler succeeds in creating what I want to call a “portable play.” As mentioned earlier, this rather unique form stands in contrast to Mahler’s own autobiographical comic books or comic strips. In fact, Mahler’s Der Weltverbesserer represents what one might call a dramatic comic. He adapts a dramatic play into the panels of a comic without losing the feel of a stage or the composition of a panel. The work represents a masterful performance.

In this chapter, I will be exploring Mahler’s adaptive comic book with the aid of Linda Hutcheon’s “double natured” understanding of adaptation as well as Brian McFarlane notion of enunciation. I will also draw on Roland Barthes’ narrative functions to aid my investigation into the narrativity of Mahler’s Der Weltverbesserer. These theories will pinpoint the elements that Nicolas Mahler’s work reinterprets within the frame work of already established literary and cultural conventions. A short discussion of Thomas Bernhard and his play will be followed by a closer examination of Mahler’s piece. I will look more closely at the transference of Thomas Bernhard’s play in Mahler’s adaptation as well as the effect or enunciation a comic book adaptation can have on an already well-known and established play from the 1980s.


Adaptation

The theoretical framework that Linda Hutcheon, Roland Barthes and Brian McFarlane present of adaptation is rooted in structuralism. The word adaptation, Linda Hutcheon points out, has multiple meanings. Her definition functions around three distinct but interrelated engagements: as a formal entity or product, as a process of creation and as a process of reception (7-8). The product, in this case, is a form of “transcoding” of a particular work, that is to say, the reduction of one piece of art which then is transferred into another art form. The process of creation, however, involves reinterpretation and then recreation through an “act of appropriation and/or salvaging” (Hutcheon 8). This means the original work is used as a type of “raw material” to build and inspire the adapted piece. The third process involves a text and its intertextuality.

We experience adaptations through our own previous experiences of a specific art work and that resonating thought repeats itself through our memory, but always with variations.

Linda Hutcheon further states that “adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative” (7). An adaptation is more than an adjustment from the original and any notion of suitability becomes problematic. The suitability of an adaptation means that the adaptation will become a part of the artistic genre into which it has been produced and thus must be adjusted accordingly, or suitably, into it. This, of course, has created some debate over the proximity an adapted piece has regarding the original. Whether it is in the notion of borrowing versus intersection versus transformation (Andrew), analogy versus commentary versus transposition (Wagner), or the source material versus reinterpretation versus a literal translation (Klein and Parker), these various notions all form a common idea of fidelity or an underlying faithfulness that the adaptation must hold to the original (Hutcheon 7). Hutcheon critiques the notion of fidelity and
tosses it out entirely because it is a weak understanding of an adaptation. Suitability remains subjective and holds little weight in a discussion about an adaptation.

Brian McFarlane adds to Hutcheon’s critiques and points out that adaptation is a selective interpretation of a work, and the pervasive notion of fidelity is only a stumbling block. He states, “Discussion of adaptation has been bedeviled by the fidelity issue, no doubt ascribable in part to the novel’s coming first, in part to the ingrained sense of literature’s greater respectability in traditional critical circles” (McFarlane 8). In other words, criticism always depends on the idea that the original literary piece has axiomatic authority over the adaptation and its meaning. In regards to film and comic book adaptations, terms of “iconophobia” (suspicion of the visual) or “logophilia” (love of the word as sacred) come up when the literary form is privileged because it is older (Hutcheon 4). This implies that the visual is foreign and the word is holy. Adaptations of written works into visual genres seem to come to an impasse in regards to their ability to converge art.

The notion of fidelity in a discussion of an adaptation fails to highlight the creative achievement that comes from what Hutcheon also describes as “repetition with variations, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (4). Although the main orthodoxy of adaptation has been the idea of fidelity, it shall not be used as it is truly a dead end. Any discussion of an adapted work that revolves around whether or not the work is “true” is fruitless. It blocks the convergence of various art forms and belittles the mode in which the audience or reader can engage the adapted work. What should be considered is what source was used and how it creates the adapted work’s ideology.

This will be borne in mind in my discussion of Mahler’s Der Weltverbesserer. Moreover, an analysis using Roland Barthes’s narrative functions provides a good strategy for unpacking
Mahler’s adaptation. Even though Roland Barthes did not work with adaptation, the narrative functionalities he identifies, i.e. distributional and integrational functions (89), provide a useful tool in articulating the uniqueness of Mahler’s adaptation. The distributional function, in Barthes’ sense, is an action or an event that takes place within the narrative (93). These are simply the acts of “doing” that occur in a story and specify an event in the narrative (93).

Integrational functions are what Barthes calls “indicies,” and are associated with the notion of “being” (93).34

Within these signifiers of the narrative there are a “whole series of intermediary forms” (93). According to Barthes, the intermediary forms can be further sub-categorized into two distinct parts. Distributional functions are divided into “cardinal functions” and “catalysts” (93). Cardinal functions are the “hinge-points” of the narrative, where the catalysts “merely ‘fill in’ the narrative space separating the hinge functions” (93). They both act chronologically and either “inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty” (94) in the narrative. However, catalysts represent only a small function deriving from the cardinal. They help the cardinal function reflect the story world’s reality. The catalysts ground the event that occurs in the narrative to a real life place that the reader, or viewer, can refer to metaphorically. An example of this would be an evergreen conifer tree when describing a setting for Christmas.

Adaptations repeat these two narrative functions, distributional and integrational. The adapter wishing to create an adaptation must adhere to the main cardinal functions of the narrative; otherwise the adaptation will not repeat the narrative’s “hinge-points” (Barthes 93) or events in the narrative that open, continue or close an alternative that is necessary for the story to develop. Without these hinge-points, the adapted piece will fail to reuse the original’s raw

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34 Indices are those details in the story that do not affect the plot per se but provide information about characters and the atmosphere or the setting.
material. Repeated cardinal functions produce the adaptation’s product, but the catalysts control the adaptation’s process of reception. They help reinforce (rather than establish) the reality in which the adaptation is being shown. So in the case of Mahler’s Der Weltverbesserer, the stage acts as a catalyst to the cardinal functions of Thomas Bernhard’s original play.

All of these functions can be transferred from a novel to a comic book but certain features of comic books, like speech bubbles and paneling, cannot. These features are represented through, according to McFarlane, the notion of enunciation (20). It describes how certain elements of the adaptation’s new medium are expressed, which do not have a direct equivalent in the adaptation’s original medium. This can be seen either through the stills of a rapidly moving camera forming movement on screen in a film or within the sequential art of the panels in a comic book. It does not create the adaptation alone but certain elements combine with the distributional narrative functions to voice the adaptation in its new medium. By extrapolating McFarlane’s idea of “enunciation” in terms of the comic book genre – the enunciation of a work adapted into panels and speech bubbles completes the comic book’s adaptation in its entirety. McFarlane explains that it is the, “apparatus that governs the presentation and reception [of] the narrative” (20), whereas the narrative can only be transferred in its singularity.\textsuperscript{35} The comic book adaptation of Der Weltverbesserer by Nicolas Mahler not only adapts Bernhard’s original, but “enunciates” certain elements that only exist in the comic book medium.

The distinctiveness of the narrative (transferred through the two distributional narrative functions) and the adaption’s enunciation (elements that cannot be transferred between art forms such as from writing to the comic book’s speech bubbles or sequential paneling), combine to form a new piece that not only acts as an adaptation but also as an addition to the original. Der

\textsuperscript{35} The apparatus is how various technical elements of an artistic genre control the performance of a particular activity or function in the narrative.
Weltverbesserer, the comic book and the play, both share the same “raw material,” that is, Thomas Bernhard’s words, but contrast each other by the way in which the former defamiliarizes the latter and vice versa; the true adaptation lies in large part in the memories of the reader, whichever form is happened upon first. Enunciation matters because Nicolas Mahler’s comic-book adaptation can either destroy any preconceived expectations of the original or displace it entirely. He utilizes elements from the comic book genre to create an adaptation that is unique. Simple repetition is not the aim of Mahler’s adaptation of Bernhard’s work; rather, it is the combination of adaptation and enunciation to create a new work within Mahler’s visual oeuvre.

Der Weltverbesserer Background

Thomas Bernhard is one of the most influential and important post-war Austrian and German-speaking authors of the twentieth-century. Between 1957 and his death in 1989, Thomas Bernhard wrote thirty-eight novels, twenty plays, and forty-five periodical publications (Dowden 85-89). He also authored several memoirs and a few volumes of lyric poetry (Dowden 1). Although his career was very successful and his work highly praised, his past was fraught with struggle, pain and despair. His father abandoned him in 1931 without ever meeting him. He also suffered from tuberculosis at an early age in life; his youth was spent in a sanatorium before he moved to Salzburg to study music at the Mozarteum from 1955 until 1957. His dreams in music were dashed due to his lung illness (Dowden xvi-xvii).

These disappointments in Bernhard’s life are reflected in his writing. “Bernhard’s art is one of satire,” his style “uncompromising,” writes Stephen Dowden in his book Understanding Thomas Bernhard (3). “It is more accurate to describe his fiction and theater as imaginative reflections upon the darkest side of human nature. In particular, his fiction unearths a moral
underworld fraught with the least appetizing human possibilities, a world that has gone out of control” (Dowden 3).

Thomas Bernhard’s oeuvre resonates strongly in Mahler’s second comic book adaptation, Der Weltverbesserer. The notion of a world gone awry is transferred quite blatantly from the script to the panels. Yet, Mahler’s adaptive translation of Bernhard’s work from one art form to another is highly imaginative.

Bernhard’s *Der Weltverbesserer* (The World-Fixer), first premiered in Bochum, Germany at the Schauspielhaus, on September 6th, 1980 (Dowden 87). The story world that Thomas Bernhard creates in his play acts as a cardinal function of the narrative. The play is comprised of five acts all revolving around the character named “Der Weltverbesserer” or the World-Fixer, who is based on the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The World-Fixer is an old, impatient, selfish fellow waiting with his wife at home to receive an honorary doctorate degree on behalf of an unnamed university for his vague philosophical thesis designed to improve the condition of the world. Before receiving his degree he must present his “Traktat,” or thesis, to members of the academy, i.e. to the president of the university, a dean, a professor, and the mayor. While waiting, the World-Fixer goes on rants about his life, such as

![Figure 1: Mahler’s adaptation of Bernhard’s words (36).](image-url)
issues related to Switzerland, eating too expensively, or complaining bitterly about the fact that
nobody will understand his “Traktat der Verbesserung der Welt”\(^{36}\) (Bernhard 129). He concludes
in the fifth scene, “Wir können die Welt nur verbessern / wenn wir sie abschaffen”\(^{37}\) (177). The
World-Fixer’s notion of improving the world only through its abolishment summarizes the
feelings he has towards almost everything. His feelings are strong and sound utterly destructive
but comical and absurd. In fact, as he is awarded his degree in the end, it remains clear, through
the exchange of dialog between the president of the university and the World-Fixer, that no one
else other than himself understands the exact philosophical nature of his thesis. The focal thought
is that only students should be engaged in “Ausdenken,” or thinking things through; neither the
students, nor the city nor even society is meant to understand it (Bernhard 180-181).

Thomas Bernhard’s play is seamlessly condensed into the comic book form through
Nicolas Mahler’s own satirical, uncompromising style. Mahler’s text replicates the narrative
functions of the original and engages in a process of transcoding as described by Hutcheon. The
actual story of the plot remains unchanged. Less obvious is how Mahler transcodes the play’s
scenes into a drawn performance within the comic book’s mise-en-page, or the layout of the
panel sequence. The biggest difference, however, is how Mahler puts more weight on the signs
of the play rather than only the words.

The Cardinal Functions of Der Weltverbesserer

Bernhard’s play is comprised of five acts each revolving around, not a location, but a
point in time. The first scene starts precisely at five in the morning. The second scene only an
hour later, the third an hour after that, the fourth three hours after that, and the fifth scene another

\(^{36}\) Thesis of the improvement of the world.
\(^{37}\) We can only improve the world if we abolish it.
hour after that, and the “Nachspiel” precisely at noon. The play’s strict, regimented time frame works to Mahler’s benefit as panels are an artistic way of presenting “time” in a highly linear, sequential manner. The acts in the play are organized in Mahler’s comic in the same linear format in which Der Weltverbesserer has been performed since the 1980s. Mahler adapts this cardinal function of the narrative without altering it.

Another obvious similarity between Bernhard’s original and Mahler’s comic adaptation lies in the characters themselves. Without Bernhard’s characters, the fields of association open to the reader or audience become a mirage. Mahler adopts all five supporting characters in the panels just as they would be on stage in a theatre: Die Frau, Der Rektor, Dekan, Professor, and Der Bürgermeister (Bernhard 118). Mahler transfers these into his typical minimalistic, albeit exaggerated style for comic effect. Mahler’s text enunciates the characters differently, however. The only clues given of any actual “stage” name is in the dialog Mahler carefully selects to condense into the panels. This leads to a field of association based on the repetition of names that Thomas Bernhard originally coined for his play (118), a kind of visual hook for Mahler to bate the readership already familiar with the play. No other context is truly needed as it is implied that the book would be read by an audience

Figure 2: Mahler’s adaptation of Bernhard’s characters in his comic book (92).
already familiar with the play, thus creating a process of reception through the form of intertextuality, common in adaptations.

Striking though is Mahler’s own depiction of the play itself. His mise-en-page is not drawn in the same fashion as in other comic books. He eliminates title panels all together and draws many panel formats on the pages; from a single paneled page to quad-paneled pages. Even the use of gutters, or the space left between panels in the sequence of a strip, is eliminated. This is used to pace the dialog of the story and, in turn, to imitate the action one might watch on a stage at a theater. The timing of Bernhard’s words and the speed in which they can be said out loud is reflected in the number of panels Mahler includes over the span of a single row, page or scene. For example, sans paroles panels, or “silent” textless panels, are utilized widely throughout the comic book, just as a play would utilize breaks or silence to induce what Stephen Dowden called Bernhard’s “dialectical refusal” or the “absence of compassion and sentimentality [which] force the reader or theatergoer into a productive opposition” (8). The dialectical refusal of the sans paroles panels, whether paced with multiple panels or merely a single paged panel, supports a commonly used dramatic effect – contemplation. In this case Nicolas Mahler’s characters and their famous emotionless, devoid-of-eyes faced expressions repeat a dramatic effect almost exclusively witnessed in cinema or at the theater.

Figure 3: “Der Weltverbesserer” by Mahler (9).
The art of Mahler’s comic transfers Bernhard’s play, characters and atmosphere to the panels. The dialog in Bernhard’s play, for instance, comes across in Mahler’s comic entirely monotonously. There is no indication of excitement in the dialog from the characters due to the lack of any grammatical syntax. The clear lack of any syntax in the original written play is an example of the indicies or details Mahler’s book reinterprets. Just as an actor would act on stage when reading the words of a script, so does the paneling of the page as a “stage” enforce a comic enunciation where commas, hyphens or even exclamation points would otherwise be used.

Mahler even reduces his minimalistic style further by drawing only a line from the character speaking the text written – not a single speech bubble is present throughout the comic book.

The only form of contrasting effect – as if a loud, dramatic reverberation were to be heard in a theater – is what I will call the emanata contrast. Emanata are drawn lines that are placed around the head of an avatar in the panel to indicate frustration, annoyance or anger. This popular comic technique is shown in Mahler’s work by the use of a blackened scribbled “sunset” above the characters and behind the speech bubbles. It is created in combination with the boldening of letters, similar to the italicized text of Bernhard’s dialog. This reinforces the indicies as the signifiers of narrativity. The scenes are transposed within the panels and held together by a directional line from the character to the text. They show how the process of adaptation salvages pieces of its “raw material” but also how the new artistic form “enunciates” new elements.

These contrasting and dramatic effects create a type of comic that I call a “portable” play, that is, a play selectively condensed and translated through Mahler’s imaginative reinterpretation into a panel sequenced comic book. This act of staging becomes a catalyst for the repeated cardinal functions, which force the reflection of the play. The opening scenes are not labeled.
with titles or even a chapter panel that is seen in Mahler’s other works. The opening scenes are presented as if an audience member would be seeing the stage of a play – the lights dimming, the curtains rising, revealing a stage of wood paneled floors, a lone arm chair and a rather rounded, blackened character sitting upright. Producing the comic book interpretation of a play as a play introduces the use of theater terms into the comic lexicon. The squared off picture can no longer be considered to be just a panel but the “stage.” The avatars drawn are no longer simply avatars but “actors” and “actresses.” The text in the speech bubbles become their “scripted” dialog and the readers now its “audience.”

For the readership that Bernhard attracts, many will find Mahler’s drawn version intertextually engaging. Rather than destroying the expectations of what one might find in Bernhard’s work, he reinforces them. By drawing the play exactly as a play, Mahler’s production not only shows a professional respect for Bernhard’s original but also involves a creative use of theater terms into the comic lexicon. Mahler’s satire in his comic prose complements Bernhard’s dramatic prose through the material’s narrative functions. The story is repeated down to the very catalyst of a play itself – the stage. The story worlds placed side by side, reflect one another as if a mirror were casting the image of the play through the panels of a comic book and back into the pupil of the audiences and their gaze.

Creative Re-interpretation

Reflections, though, become distorted and reversed in mirrors when put under the flame. Although the plot, the structure, the characters and the overall serious tone in the play stay the same, Mahler’s script in Der Weltverbesserer does not. Since Mahler’s art is also one of satire, a disorienting view where only the bare minimum is depicted in the paneled “stages” reflects
another mode of engagement. Bernhard’s “actors” are indeed transformed into Mahler’s avatars keeping their typically exaggerated noses and harping on asinine, mundane issues. The comic author stays true to his popularized style and this should not be mistaken as merely repetitive.

The gestalt of the panels only emphasizes further the varying degrees the process of adaptation from a play to a comic book represents. The edge of the stage is always blackened to focus the reader’s attention back onto the “actors” performing. The silence of the sans paroles panels refocuses the dire seriousness in which Thomas Bernhard’s characters seem to be stuck. The comic simplifies the play to almost an excerpt of the original. This plays on an interesting notion: if the portable comic book of a play “as a play” must be read in order to be “seen,” then the performance in the book is not drawn by Mahler, but directed by him. It is as if the play drawn in the comic is being “debuted,” held within the confines of a hardcover book. This creates a convergence of literature and comics that demonstrate the elements Mahler’s adaptations enunciate in the comic book medium.

Figure 4: Mahler’s comic book enunciation of existentialism (122-124)
This direction has profound implications for Mahler’s adaptation as it explores a type of comic enunciation of existentialism in his “play.” Just as Bernhard was skeptical about the notion of someone creating meaning in an otherwise ridiculous universe, Mahler, too, juxtaposes this philosophical doctrine almost as a satirical tribute to the man Bernhard himself. The fiction attempts to find meaning where there is none, something that even Bernhard creates for his characters. All of this is what Mahler does through his minimalistic style and his shortening of Bernhard’s original play. The absurdity that the universe holds for all of the avatars Mahler draws in his comic books is the setting for Mahler’s astute comedy: this comedy is a combination of Bernhardian “catastrophe, despair and mockery” (Dowden 4-5), with Mahler’s imitation, repetition and exaggeration of reality. The outright rejection of existentialism by both Bernhard and Mahler is reflected in the characters and scenarios they both create in their variants of *Der Weltverbesserer*. The fate of these protagonists as they fall into the “maw of oblivion,” is evident in the comic book with the opening and closing sans paroles panels in each of the five scenes on stage (Dowden 5). The curtains open and close as if the entire universe around them is being created and, then, abruptly, unexpectedly, even subsequently, obliterated all within the span of a few panels.

Furthermore, the play Mahler “directs” with his comic adaptation seems to challenge Bernhard’s request, in his will, that none of his plays be “staged” for the duration of his copyright. [The copyright lasts seventy years from the date of the author’s death (Dowden 83).] Significantly, Mahler’s comic book is printed by the publisher Suhrkamp who currently owns the rights to Bernhard’s works. Mahler even indicates on the copyright page of *Der Weltverbesserer* that the site where he actually drew the book was in Austria. Now it is hard to believe that Thomas Bernhard would have viewed a comic book of his play drawn in the same manner as a
play, “performed” within the panels of the book, as an actual “staging.” Nevertheless, Nicolas Mahler directs and stages Thomas Bernhard’s play through his comic book interpretation, thus maneuvering around Bernhard’s own expressed wish that his works not be performed, at all, in their entirety, in Austria, for the remainder of his copyright.

Conclusion

Nicolas Mahler’s version of Der Weltverbesserer signifies a stepping-stone for comic readers and theatergoers alike. The comic book acts not only as an adaptation of Thomas Bernhard’s drama but also as a bridge between literature and comic books. Mahler adapts Bernhard’s written text by stripping it down to the bare minimum necessary to express what the original does. Also the panels, although sequential in their timing, defamiliarize the reader. The performance in the comic book could never be expressed either on a real stage or in a script. This aspect of defamiliarization leads to a type comic existentialism, only possible on Mahler’s comic book stage. The replacement of the traditional stage, the minimalist characters and the reality that Mahler satirically creates are masterful and call into question whether this book should only be classified as a mere comic book. The thought-provoking text that Nicolas Mahler’s adaptive work evokes reveals something new, a type of dramatized comic that not only transposes a scripted play by Thomas Bernhard but that enunciates the drama through a collection of sequential paneled pages only possible in a comic book.

Mahler bridges an artistic gap between the literary and comic genres through his dramatic comic Der Weltverbesserer; other important metatextual narrative styles further complement this connection. They are most noticeable in his autobiographical comic book Franz Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine. I would now like to explore how Mahler translates adaptations of classic German
authors into his autobiographical comic genre. This discussion should provide additional insight in reevaluating his comics not only within the Austrian comic book scene but within German literary and cultural studies in particular.
CHAPTER III: THE COMIC BOOK ABOUT COMIC BOOKS

Nicolas Mahler’s fourth volume of autobiographical comic strips, *Franz Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine* (2014), brings together a collection of satirical stories about Mahler’s own experiences in negotiating a place for his comics between the high- and pop-culture world and between literature and art. Mahler creates a unique form of comic book in that his work revolves around German literary heavy weights such as Franz Kafka, Thomas Bernhard, Heinrich von Kleist, Robert Musil, and Mahler’s own fictional pseudo-intellectual figure whom he calls “der Germanist.” In a text that includes a prologue, an epilogue, fifteen numbered chapters and a “Materialien” appendix, Mahler constructs an avatar of himself, who in absurd scenarios, struggles to voice the legitimacy of the comic genre as a creative, thought-provoking literary style, through the very thing itself. It is a comic book about comics and represents a type of self-reflectivity that has become the hallmark of modern literature since the Romantic period. In the seventeen scenarios of the text, everyday scenes that include phone chats with his mother or existential discussions with his friends, Mahler (the avatar) engages with every aspect of the production of comic strips in the contemporary German-speaking realm. *Franz Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine* absorbs the reader in a metatextual discourse on the processes involved in writing and publishing comic books.

His literary adaptations play a central role in this comic book about comics as well. In the following section, I will provide a close reading of the prologue section and the first chapter of Mahler’s comic book *Franz Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine*. I will look more closely at the narrative structure, the characters, and the panels in the entire work. I will provide examples of how Mahler deals with the seemingly unending nescience his avatar comes across in various social contexts and how he transforms these encounters by creating what Bertolt Brecht called
“Verfremdungseffekt,” or an alienation effect. These episodes encourage the reader to view the discussion at a comic distance. Moreover, this process points to comics as a productive and alternative forum for discussing cultural and literary issues.

Narrative Structure

Nicolas Mahler’s comic book *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine* emulates other literary works with its unique multi-narrative structure. The book is divided into a prologue, fifteen chapters and an epilogue, which together create seventeen separate stories, none of which have any interconnecting plot. Mahler constructs two distinct forces that play out within the panels, a narrator and a protagonist avatar reminiscent of the author himself. Mahler, the author, uses the avatar drawn in his likeness as a protagonist in sequences of scenarios, similar to that of scenes in a play like *Der Weltverbesserer*. There is an inner monologue and dialogue occurring as a first-person narrative directs the stage, or panels, periodically. The personal stories about seemingly banal encounters are drawn in a minimalistic style to maintain a level of comic banality but also distance.

The minimalist story line is complemented by a minimalist graphic style. Nicolas Mahler ignores the founding father of comics Rodolphe Töpffer’s theory of physiognomy\(^\text{38}\) by omitting the facial features of his avatars (Kukkonen 15). Mahler creates an avatar as a present homodiegetic narrator who stands as stiff as the pen he used to draw him. His style in this particular piece is unique as the narrative becomes more comical due in part to the juxtaposing of his featureless characters to the serious scenarios.

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\(^{38}\) Physiognomy, in the context of comic books, is the interpretation of a character’s personality through drawn superficial features, especially of the face.
From the start in this work, Mahler introduces the reader to a rather regimented mise-en-page. There is a pattern in this particular work: a clear four-panel sequence per page leads to a climatic peak in the fourth and final panel. In this comic book, as seen in his previous work, the distinct feature of his mise-en-page is the total absence of gutters. This unbroken panel format leaves little room for breaks in the sequence of the story. It forces the reader to visualize the scene while seemingly observing the following image. This visualization, of course, is separated only by a single, prominent black line. The effect continues to speed up the readers pace by forcing the eyes to the next panel before the aforementioned panel has been fully reviewed. This relative quickness reflects what the comic and literary business in the last several decades continues to force on its readership: the absorption of new material as fast as possible without allowing much time for reflection.

Occasionally, however, Mahler provides the reader with an opportunity to reflect on the content through comic special effects: he uses not only an absence of gutters but three other forms of Verfremdungseffekte. They include Mahler’s inclusion of sans paroles panels, a separate panel for each of the chapter’s title page and Mahler’s use of emanata to create contrast.\(^\text{39}\) The latter are short lines drawn around the heads of the characters to indicate importance, frustration or annoyance (Brownlee).

The first particularly interesting ploy, then, that Mahler utilizes in his narration is incorporating sans paroles panels. Sans paroles comics are a popular form of comics in the French-speaking domain and depict a sequential narrative without words. Comic theorist Karin Kukkonen explains that, “Sometimes, regular comics have passages which feature no captions, [or] speech bubbles in order to achieve effects such as the slowing down or speeding up of

\(^{39}\) The three modes are unique to Mahler’s comic book style in that he repeats these effects multiple times throughout his work. They cause a distancing as well as a contrasting effect in these specific panels.
action, of rendering stillness, [or] a poetic, delicate quality of the situation” (176). Mahler’s use of sans paroles panels in this comic speeds up his punchlines. A prime example can be found in the first chapter’s story.

Mahler utilizes various panels devoid of words, which create the pause mentioned above. Examples of this are his panels depicting his avatar and his avatar’s loud mother. The reader has time to absorb his mother’s disdainful remark about the popular German tenor Peter Hofmann’s death. At the same time, Mahler introduces an often repeated punch line about the famous German artist’s death that his mother delivers over the phone (14). These disruptive panels distance the protagonist from Mahler’s story and in turn, the reader. By doing so, Mahler forces a metatextual alienation on the reader and demonstrates how his mother’s short attention span (from her non sequitur about the death of Hofmann) makes the case for his minimalistic versions

Figure 5: Sans paroles panel following an emanata contrast (14/3-4).
of great masters.

In addition to the sans paroles panels that Mahler includes to the same effect throughout other chapters, he introduces another alienating format by utilizing the chapter’s title introduction page as a borderless panel. This panel is a kind of rhetorical device to coax the reader to think of the subject from a different point of view. The literary allusion here is defamiliarized because it is brought into connection with an unexpected image. It is as if the title panel of the strip is a separate prologue strip that prepares the reader for a change of topic from the previous chapter of panels. Examples of this are the bug creature under the prologue title or a picture of Mahler’s avatar sitting below a quote from Thomas Bernhard at the beginning of the first chapter.

Kafka’s bug from the *Metamorphosis*, shown on the cover and in the prologue’s title panel, is significant here as it is used as a type of hook for the reader to engage with Mahler’s work further. A field of association is assumed for Mahler’s audience, but he breaks this expectation within the chapter by not repeating the cardinal functionality of the narrative he seems to promise to adapt. A similar association occurs with the quote from Bernhard. The reader is expected from the onset of the title’s panel to know who Bernhard is and why the quote has weight. The combination of an assumed meaning with that meaning’s expectation creates an alienating moment for the readers as the chapter continues. This is interesting because it forces the reader to second-guess what the joke is and where it starts or ends.

Like changing the direction of the tracks at a train junction, the preceding panels of each strip lead in different directions and can evoke a variety of associations and, by extension, messages. Here is where the metatextuality of Mahler’s work comes into play. Kafka and Bernhard have significant name value, especially with regard to high literary culture, and Mahler
uses them to his advantage. By condensing these two “masters” into a simplified, minimalistic sketch before quickly moving beyond them, Mahler undermines their greatness. He in essence recreates a catalyst function but ignores the cardinal function that each author’s name should imply. The name signifies nothing more than a comedic hook to catch the potential reader’s gaze. The effect of his name-dropping in regards to the cultural and literary “Betrieb” establish expectations in the reader that are, however, always thwarted. This, in effect, serves as a kind of specific enunciation seldom witnessed in other literary genres, let alone comic books. It causes the reader to make sense of the connection between the famous “dead” writers mentioned in the text while the images in the panels stay unrelated. Mahler thereby shifts the reader’s focus onto the substance that holds together the panels, which becomes more important than the name represented in the title. A metatextuality starts to emerge that is being commented on through the comic book itself. Playing on narrative dissidence, Mahler relates to Kafka and Bernhard in a satirical yet collaborative way, namely in that he challenges the readers to think not only of his jokes but also how they are strengthened through the lenses of Bernhard and Kafka’s own literary prose and style by only mentioning their name.

Another overt example of Mahler’s use of alienating effect is the use of a collection of emanatas, a key feature in his work. The emanata contrast uses a semiotic system of lined constructs and showcases certain panels, characters and words. It is used as a highlighting effect to increase the emphasis of a certain panel which, in turn, can heighten the annoyance on the part of the reader and draws attention to the contrast the panel conveys in the strip in an otherwise very black and white story world. In the case of his autobiographical works, Mahler achieves this contrast by the use of a blackened scribbled “sunset” above the avatars and/or behind their speech bubbles.
In his fifth chapter Mahler depicts an effective use of emanata contrast for his desired comedic peak. Mahler’s avatar is sitting behind a desk at a book store signing his newly published literary adaption of Thomas Bernhard’s *Alte Meister*. An elderly fellow, stated by the narrator to be roughly in his eighties, wiggles over to the only seat in front of Mahler and slowly sits down. The elderly man berates Mahler’s avatar and asks what he is doing there. Mahler’s avatar responds by saying he is simply signing his comic book *Alte Meister*. The elderly man proceeds to respond with his thoughts about a specific comic book by Reinhard Kleist entitled *Der Boxer* (2012). The man criticizes the comic book as having a flat and banal dialog and the text for being completely awful. Suddenly, he switches one-hundred-and-eighty degrees to mention how he really enjoyed it all. These dialogs take place within only two side-by-side panels. The two panels, being drawn without gutters, lead to an emanata contrast at the top of the panel delivering the conflicting message. Mahler’s avatar is as puzzled as the reader. The comedic peak lies in the juxtaposition of disdain regarding comics and praise on the part of the elderly man. The comic tension lies in the absurd contradiction inherent in the panel.

Contradictory responses on the part of the various and often unrelated characters and in the construction of their imagery, especially related to the topic of comics, are a common feature.

Figure 6: Example of the emanata contrast (36/4).
in Mahler’s *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine*. The most prominent contradictory feature is the characters themselves. They are strange recreations of either real people encountered by the author Mahler or creative satirical adaptations of literary figures.

Kafkesque Avatars

There are fifty characters in Mahler’s *Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine* but only a few are given actual names; most of the characters are identified in terms of their social role, i.e. as “neighbor,” “middle-aged woman” or “comic nerd.” Similar to how the absurd scenarios narrated alienate the reader as well as the protagonist, the characters in Mahler’s work do so, too. They are for the most part non-descript yet, curiously enough, have in common unpleasant, even antagonistic aspects. All of the characters are depicted as short, fat and blunt in comparison to Mahler’s avatar, which is tall, skinny and witty. The first discernable, reoccurring character is a bug-like figure just below the title of the prologue. Another is in the fifth chapter where Mahler’s avatar is confronted by the “gebrechlichen, circa 80-jährigen Mann” whose name is only revealed to be Horst by another character who, however, too, remains nameless (39). Other supporting characters, most belonging to academia, are included without names but have professional titles: the *Vertreter des Kunstbetriebs*, the “Germanist” (who is described as someone who has a scarf wrapped around his neck many times over), *die Osteopathin*, a Journalist, a “mittelalte Dame mit Mobiltelefon,” *Verleger Hans*, *Zeichnerkollegen*, and a “bärtigen Theoretiker.” There are a number of other characters without titles who can barely be distinguished from one another. Only context clues and assumptions can be made to discern a title for them, leaving their names and identities open to speculation.
Even though Mahler has many anonymous characters, he includes several very prominent ones, too, and all happen to be literary figures. Franz Kafka, Thomas Bernhard, Robert Musil and Peter Hofmann are the most prominent or better known. Oddly enough though, only Thomas Bernhard, Peter Hofmann and Robert Musil are actually depicted in the book as an avatar. Franz Kafka is mentioned by name as a metatextual joke on the cover, in the prologue scenario and in the “Materialien” appendix. The others are adapted into the text where Mahler, the avatar, associates himself in some way with each of these weighty writers, in a comic fashion. For instance, on the title panel of the prologue, there is an image of a bug-like character that evokes associations with Gregor Samsa, Franz Kafka’s main protagonist in the *Die Verwandlung* [Metamorphosis] (1915). This creature quickly disappears as the title page is turned. We might speculate that Mahler drew this either as a metatextual joke of Kafka’s own bug, or as a version of Mahler’s own avatar as the bug. Since comic book stories are known as sequential art forms and the title panels in Mahler’s work act as an opening panel, it is safe to interpret that Kafka functions as more than merely a gimmick. Other associations occur with Kafka as well.

In the prologue entitled “Die Verwechslung,” an associative play on words with Kafka’s own *Die Verwandlung* [Metamorphosis], the story line depicts a casual encounter with a neighborly character confusing Rolf Kauka’s characters, Fix and Foxi, with Franz Kafka’s characters. This strange association is strengthened when the title page’s panel depicting an oversized six-armed bug is viewed first. Another oddity of Mahler’s comic adaptation of Kafka is of the bug itself. The bug has enlarged antennas that appear over the creature’s small head. To the casual observer it seems as if they are merely overdrawn, which certainly has a comic effect. But what stands out is how disconnected the antennas are. They seemingly hover in place over the anthropomorphized caricature of the bug. In fact, the only other hovering feature drawn in
the comic book by Mahler is that of Mahler’s own avatar, which isn’t introduced in the comic book until after the prologue’s title panel. His eyebrows or hair can be observed hovering unassisted above his oversized glasses in a similar effect to that of the bug. Again, by reading the panels sequentially rather than in separate sets, Mahler adapts Kafka’s character Gregor Samsa in a comic fashion that can only be enunciated through his comic book.

I want to suggest that Mahler has adapted Kafka’s bug by transforming it into Mahler’s own avatar at the onset of the comic book. The bug in this work is not merely a comical footnote featured only in the prologue but an adaptive, allegoric (re)creation of Mahler’s avatar. His avatar is created to act as Mahler’s own Kafkaesque creature throughout the comic situations that he narrates in the panels and mirrors Kafka’s tragic drama but in a comedic self-deprecating fashion. Since the avatar Mahler created in the panels could be said to be himself, the dramatic change his avatar undergoes mirrors the struggle of understanding that Kafka or his character George Samsa were confronted with. This, in effect, links together Kafka and Mahler’s avatar as a creative
reinterpretation in what Linda Hutcheon described as the adaptation’s “formal entity” or “product” (7-8).

Mahler’s comic adaptation also includes an appendix or definition of terms and casts them in a comic way on numerous levels, i.e. both in terms of subject-matter, commentary and imagery. In fact, in the back of the book under the “Materialien” portion, Mahler shows off more of his adaptations of other Kafka “Schöpfungen” [Creatures]. Mahler refers back to page nine and includes Josef K. (Der Prozess), Fräulein Grubach (Der Prozess), Der Landvermesser (Das Schloss), Der Wächter (Der Prozess), der Prügler (Der Prozess), and also, George Samsa (Die Verwandlung). The significance here is on the level of familiarity with Kafka’s own characters the reader must have, a necessity if s/he is to understand Mahler’s metatextual jokes. Mahler’s layered jokes are meant for a more refined, highbrow German literary reader. The educated readership of Mahler’s jokes is definitely a unique aspect of his work. In this way, Mahler’s comics contrast with the majority of American comic-book audiences.

For example, Mahler’s Kafka caricatures are meant to amuse as they are drawn in a Disneyesque style that includes larger eyes, anthropomorphized figures, all with smiles drawn smugly across their faces. Thus, Mahler defamiliarizes these absurd yet serious Kafkaesque characters by transforming them into almost silly but familiar characters. For example Gregor Samsa is shown, this time more directly, as a six-legged bug lying on its back with the characteristic detached “ears” above his head. This depiction is different from the same bug-like creature Mahler includes under the prologue’s borderless title panel. Gregor Samsa seems to resemble a puppy rolling on the floor as if he is waiting for his belly to be rubbed. Another Kafkaesque character included in the comic is Der Wächter. He resembles a Care Bear, the beloved teddy bear of the 1980s and 1990s with a giant heart sown across its chest and a caring
smile any parent would trust. A further oddity appears in the language of this character’s title though. This character has nothing in common with the watchman or Türhüter in Der Prozess. Although the six figures are clearly adapted from Kafka’s works, as the appendix reinforces, they have little in common with Kafka’s characters. They are, however, stylized in a uniform manner in Mahler’s work. They lack pupils in their eyes and are non-physiognomic. Including the few cheeky smiles he uses to emphasis their “Disney” look, the characters are adapted into Mahler’s story world devoid of features to indicate a specific personality. By joining their likeness to the beloved style of Disney, but leaving away their pupils, Mahler provokes a feeling of strangeness, a detached push from the expected – Kafkaesque surrealism. Mahler’s work draws on and yet alters Kafka’s characters by adding satire.

A second literary character Mahler adapts in his comic is that of Thomas Bernhard. He first introduces the Bernhard avatar in the second chapter entitled “Ein Traum.” Here he draws Bernhard as a short, bug-like being, with a large, spotted nose, wearing Lederhosen and looking like a young boy. The avatar is depicted in a comic manner as he sits on top of Mahler’s avatar who is lying under blankets on a bed; it seems like Bernhard is waking him up to tell him some exciting gossip. Again, Mahler shows the reader how his comic adaptation remains just that – comedic. Bernhard’s reputation as a literary great is downplayed completely in this panel as a child who is cared for by Mahler’s avatar. The narrator directs Bernhard’s avatar to play the guitar dressed in normal clothing.

Figure 8: Thomas Bernhard's avatar lying on top of Mahler's avatar (19).
Mahler’s Bernhard then criticizes his avatar’s pessimistic attitude towards himself and the world after singing a rather cheerful song. As the chapter progresses so does Mahler’s comedic play with Bernhard’s avatar. For instance, Bernhard falls over the balcony as he waits for Mahler’s avatar to make more coffee. He is met by his “Tante” Hedwig, the name of Bernhard’s so-called “Lebensmensch,” or life partner, who accompanied the historical Bernhard through life. She helps him back up the stairs to the protagonist’s apartment but as they both enter, Bernhard suddenly has a wardrobe change into Lederhosen shown in the chapter’s title panel. His so-called aunt then whisks him off to the train station. Bernhard tells Hedwig to carry the suitcases. Mahler, thus, succeeds in making fun of both the literary business as well as the literary greats in this comic by depicting them in banal, even childish, contexts.

Mahler’s adaptation of well-known literary figures reflects his particular use of alienation effects to heighten his interpretative style. A close reading of two key scenes from Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine will further illustrate and illuminate Mahler’s use of literary adaptation in the comic genre. Most importantly, it will provide examples for what Mahler does to the scenarios and characters that create moments of Verfremdung using intertextual and metatextual discourse.

Prologue

A blackened six-armed bug stands underneath the prologue’s title “Die Verwechslung” unmistakably referencing Franz Kafka and his work Die Verwandlung (1915). Mahler creates a four panel format across a few pages to open his text about comic adaptation as a legitimate literary genre. Mahler’s avatar is depicted alone in a minimalistic story world. The walls and floors are all white and the only distinction of shape or contrast is that of the harsh black lines
creating borders within the panel of where one object starts and another ends; this further underscores Mahler’s avatar’s solitude. The bug quickly vanishes however and is replaced by the avatar of Mahler. The scene opens with his avatar standing with keys in the doorway as he is joined by an elderly woman who enters at the bottom right of the panel. She is shown as short, fat, with large curly hair, breasts scribbled atop one another, and shopping bags at her sides. The speech bubbles taking up most of the space within the panel dwarf Mahler’s own avatar as it looks expressionless and devoid of emotion.

The woman greets Mahler’s avatar with enthusiasm as is evident from the multiple exclamation points ending the sentences. She mentions reading about him in the newspaper and even responds with “toll” [great] that he makes comics (9). The second panel contrasts with the first. Mahler makes use of a certain technique routinely found in cinema. He uses a type of continuity effect commonly utilized in film. The continuity effect is used to enlarge the scene, in this case the panels, without a disruptive effect. It is as if the world within the panel has become smaller, the panel able to show more of the characters and their surroundings within. By doing so, he allows himself room within the panel to exaggerate the effect the words have on the protagonist and the scenario. This is shown by the use of an emanata contrast above the characters, thus creating a moment of alienation. When the woman in the panel mentions that her favorite comic characters are that of Kafka’s (rather than Kauka), Mahler’s emanata contrast
bring the panel to the scenario’s first climatic peak, and defamiliarizes the panel from the others. The blackened emanata that Mahler draws behind the speech bubbles and above the characters alienates the woman from Mahler’s avatar. It highlights the joke by singling out the panel that contains the punch line. This forces the reader to reflect on the semiotic meaning, creating distance between the reader and the characters.

As the woman continues to speak to Mahler, whose reaction remains unchanged, she explains all the different figures by Kafka that she enjoyed. This is, of course, a ludicrous conversation. The conversation is followed quickly by yet another dark, blackened scribble settling over the panel. This second emanata contrast leads to a moment where the reader is led to reflect on the character’s text in the bubbles above her. Mahler’s avatar merely stands and stares as if he is trying to read the speech bubbles himself. Then the name “Lupo” appears which acts as a metatextual joke to highlight the common ignorance Austrians have about comic books and their better-known characters. The name is written entirely in capital letters to draw the focus of the reader to the name. The woman asks about what type of animal the character Lupo was in Kafka’s comics. Mahler responds with only a single sentence, again with the main focus of the sentence on the name written all in capital letters. He corrects her comments by remarking that she has confused Kafka with Kauka, the famous comic author who created *Fix und Foxi* in the mid-1950s. The woman then is shown flabbergasted as indicated by the squeans, or lines emanating from her head. For the final time within the eight-paneled strip, Mahler uses an emanata contrast above the characters to indicate a moment of frustration. The woman walks off down the hall yelling, “Genau! **KAUKA, DER war’s!**”\(^4\) (Mahler 10). The effect of large

\(^4\) Exactly! Kauka was who it was!
embolden letters within the speech bubble is to emphasize the importance of the name, raise the
comedic punchline and to alienate the reader observing the scene.

The short prologue indicates an exaggerated form of emanata that encompasses the top of
a panel and depicts frustration or annoyance of the avatars in the scene. This brings about a kind
of Verfremdungseffekt to his strips. These moments are repeated multiple times throughout his
strips creating a rhythmic contrast of climatic highs and pauses in both the text and visual panels.

“1. Kapitel” – Allegoric Expression

After the prologue, the first strip chapter starts with
another borderless panel of Mahler’s avatar drawing a four-
paneled comic on top of a crudely drawn table with a
tombstone opposite him. Above him is the following Thomas
Bernhard quotation, “Es ist alles lächerlich, wenn man an den
Tod denkt” \(^{41}\) (11). Mahler’s avatar seems to adapt
Bernhard’s quotation literally by breaking the figurative
expression of Bernhard in a comedic manner. Mahler depicts
his protagonist under the quote and thinking of death on the
very page that seems to signify a joke by one of the most
important Austrian authors of the twentieth century. He combines the use of the written word to
a drawn image, delivering the message it carries as an ironic illusion. This creates comic irony by
making use of Bernhard’s statement and satirizing it. Consequently, the reader is prepared for the
irony that follows in this chapter.

\(^{41}\) Everything is ridiculous whenever you think of death.
Interestingly, this chapter begins with a new panel structure – a sub-narrative panel. This creates a meta-narrative in the panels through its explanation of a story inside a story. The narrator in this case, provides the background information about Mahler, the avatar, and what is going on in the panel below. The words within the sub-narrative panels are a kind of stage direction by a narrator who seems to have access to Mahler’s thoughts and acts as a guide in the scene where the reader views Mahler’s avatar. The sub-narrative overview is presented simultaneously with the speech bubble’s text of the character in the panel.

The sub-narrative panel reads, “Dezember 2010… Telefonat mit meiner Mutter” (13), and is followed by the typical minimalistic story world of nothing but white walls blending into a white, bottomless floor typical of Mahler’s comic books. Only a telephone, table and a small desk are discernable, leading the eye of the reader to Mahler’s avatar’s blackened character: an emotionless face carrying a large nose and glasses. Above him is a speech bubble containing the words not of a character but from the phone he holds. The tail of the speech bubble has a line leading back to the phone itself and the words. This indicates they do not come from Mahler’s head. Interestingly enough, Mahler reinforces this effect of the voice from the phone using a different directional tail all together. Rather than the usual straight arrow tail leading to the speech bubble of the character who is speaking, the tail is drawn in a zigzag fashion, emulating an electronic bolt which leads the text to its point of origin. This semiotic expression of a “phone” (the voice is identified in the sub-narrative panel as that of Mahler’s mother) subverts the understanding that the mother’s voice is powerful, loud and dominating through the course of the chapter. Mahler uses it to a comedic effect as if his mother was yelling at his avatar like a child, belittling his efforts as an artist. This is important because Mahler’s avatar is confronted

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42 December 2010… Phone call with my mother.
with a voice over the phone in combination with his emanata contrast and creates more moments of alienation in his comic book.

The font of the text in this panel is thicker and bolder in contrast to the stylized text found throughout Mahler’s other works. It is as if the words were to be read with the same muffled voice that is often heard through the speakers of a telephone. Each letter also is capitalized. We know from comic convention and netiquette\textsuperscript{43} that capitalized words in email or other forms of electronic messages represent shouting. Moreover, Paula Luna, director of the department of typography and graphic communication at the UK’s University of Reading, is quoted in an article by Alice Robb and explains that the use of capital letters in a print give the text a type of “grandeur,” “pomposity,” or “aesthetic seriousness.” “All-capitals provide visibility—maximum size within a given area” (Robb). This holds true for Mahler’s distinct phone text. The voice being tailed from the phone is shown in a speech box (reminiscent of a text box in fact) rather than a bubble. Large, capital letters dominate the box that, if interpreted using netiquette, can be read as a loud, offensive and demanding speech.

As the panels and text progress, Mahler’s avatar is berated by his mother for even attempting to adapt one of Bernhard’s works into a comic leads to the first climatic emanata:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Phone:} UND WIE SCHAUT DER BEI DIR AUS, DER THOMAS BERNHARD?\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Mahler: Na, ich zeichne ja nicht \underline{ihn} selber, sondern sein Buch \textit{ALTE MEISTER}.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} Rules of etiquette used in technologic forms of communications, namely the internet or net for short (“Netiquette”).
\textsuperscript{44} And how does he look like according to you, that Thomas Bernhard?
\textsuperscript{45} Well, I’m not just drawing him himself, but rather his book \textit{Alte Meister}. 
Phone: **DAS GANZE BUCH? DAS STELL ICH MIR EHER MÜHSAM VOR.**\(^46\)

Mahler: Ich zeichne natürlich nicht jeden Satz, es ist stark gekürzt.\(^47\)

Phone: **JESSAS! DER PETER HOFMANN IST GESTORBEN!**\(^48\) (13-14)

Upon reaching the emanata contrast on the seventh panel, Mahler breaks the pace and tone of the dialog and, subsequently, the story world. He uses a type of sans paroles panel that brings the allegorically powerful tone of his loud mother and Mahler’s avatar to a complete halt. The panel contains not a single word or speech bubble, only Mahler’s avatar standing as stiff as a pillar, stunned.

After the pause, Mahler continues his discussion about his Bernhard project only to be interrupted by another climatic emanata when his mother yells, “**DER TONY CURTIS IST AUCH GESTORBEN!**” (15). Even though Mahler depicts absolutely no facial features to represent any personal anguish or annoyance, the emanata breaks down into strong, dark, emboldening lines above the character and dialog which, in turn, creates an atmosphere of dread. For each stand that Mahler, the avatar, takes, he is interrupted by the voice of his mother and the news of famous dead German or American artists or writers.

The narrative between Mahler’s avatar and his mother’s voice over the phone in the beginning panels lead to following conclusion: A comic adaptation of Bernhard’s classic *Alte Meister* leads to death. Adapting a dead man’s works will invariably lead to death, the mother seems to say in her quirky logic. This represents a rather heavy thought-provoking idea in the

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46 The entire book? I image that to be rather painful.
47 I’m not going to draw every sentence. It is keenly reduced.
48 Jesus! Peter Hofmann has died!
comic’s panels that seem not only to act as a type of attack on Mahler, the author, but also on Austria’s disrespect regarding contemporary comic book adaptations.

The Mahler figure realizes at last that his mother is not reeling off names of dead authors to spite Mahler and his comic adaptation but simply because she is distracted by a television program called “die Toten des Jahres”\(^49\) that she is watching during the telephone conversation (17). Mahler’s avatar is left in yet another sans paroles panel which further illustrates Mahler’s self-deprecating humor. Rather than bringing the flow to a halt for a brief second, it creates a sense of urgency through comedic effect. The accumulation of panels where the mother talks over or around Mahler, exacerbating the miscommunication that occurs, expands on Mahler’s media critic. He engages in a form of comic sensationalism that satirically creates a stunned and speechless avatar when confronted by the news of deaths. By inducing an over-hyped response, he seems to also make fun of the reader’s familiarization with the people his mother names as well as his mother’s ignorance that stems from an exclusive reliance on a media that provides nothing more than a distraction. This distraction contributes to her loss sense of tragedy and seriousness the very moment the television presents her with the series of deaths.

The panels continue with Mahler mentioning Thomas Bernhard’s name to his mother and a brief description of the challenge he is facing as he adapts Bernhard’s work in comic-strip form. The quick and sudden response of the voice on the phone leads to the last sans paroles panel and the last emanata contrast of the chapter. Once his mother acknowledges Bernhard in an annoyed tone, a strong pause follows before Mahler delivers his main joke and ironic message:

“DER HAT AM SCHLUSS AUCH NICHT MEHR GUT

\(^{49}\) The deaths of the year.
AUSGESCHAUT. FURCHTBAR!\(^50\) Mahler’s avatar, too, has the feeling comic books and literary comic adaptations are a frivolous undertaking, one that needs more thought and, especially in the case of Mahler’s mother, more attention.

**Conclusion**

*Franz Kafka's nonstop Lachmaschine* signifies a master-piece of comic adaptive prose that undermines discussions about literary canon. It also legitimizes the comic genre as a thought-provoking literary style. Mahler’s running gags with literary heavy-weights, such as Kafka or Bernhard, reinterprets them through elements only comic books can show. His self-deprecating, almost sympathetic comedy disarms the readers in a playful reversal of their expectations. Mahler plays with the German literary canon but also with the reader for being drawn to his text in the first place. A literary illusion takes place through metatextuality in Mahler’s work, which creates an attraction for educated readers familiar with the names and works of Franz Kafka, Thomas Bernhard, Heinrich von Kleist or Robert Musil.

Through the close analysis of the first two chapters, the comic book by Nicolas Mahler reveals not only the use of moments of alienation in comic books but also of comic adaptation and enunciation of literary figures. A satirical tone is always present. Mahler condenses and repeats names of literary figures from Kafka to Bernhard. This repetition of names is used more than as a mere entrepreneurial gimmick to sell his works. He uses the names as a needle that sews the works together into the fabric of the German literary field. This in turn creates a field of association which disarms the reader. It exposes issues normally unheard of in a comic book. His masterful use of comic effects such as sans paroles panels or his emanata contrast create scenes

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\(^{50}\) He also didn’t look too good towards the end. Terrible!
of unending nescience in which his characters seem to be stuck and creates a series of
metatextual jokes. This in turn can be connected to the German-language comic genre and
subsequently, the Austrian attitude on the Austrian comic genre as well. Likewise, Mahler
continues the Austrian and German comedic traditions by delivering socio-cultural criticisms in a
self-deprecating, albeit ironic, manner.
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have attempted to introduce Nicolas Mahler and showcase his importance to an English-speaking readership in the context of the German comic book genre as well as contemporary Austrian literature. By analyzing two of his works, Franz Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine and Der Weltverbesserer, I have shown that Mahler represents not only an award winning literary and comic book author, but also a comedic genius that challenges the boundaries of what can be considered canonic in the context of the German literary field. I also hope to have brought attention to the German comic book genre by placing him within its well-established and growing tradition. Nicolas Mahler continues to shape previously canonized German literature into comic books while also making it apparent to many that comic books are a thought-provoking, pictured literary genre.

Interviews provided a valuable insight into Mahler’s struggle in finding recognition as a comic book author in Austria. Misunderstandings about the comic book genre seem to show a type of disrespect that has forced him to publish abroad. At the same time, however, his international presence and popularity from publishers in France, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, and the U.S. continue to work to his advantage. Even in literary reviews, positive assessments of his works are printed time and time again. The majority of the reviews concern his adaptive or autobiographical comic books; they do provide insight and an understanding that is reminiscent of other German and Austrian literary greats.

Since Nicolas Mahler is both an artist and an author, he bridges the artistic gap between literature and comics. Through the aid of Linda Hutcheon’s “dual nature” approach, I have shown how Mahler’s work can be recognized as one of adaptation. His dramatic comic books are not only a product of transference from one medium to another but also represent reinterpretation
and recreation. Barthes makes us recognize how Mahler uses narrative catalysts and cardinal functions while adding enunciation (McFarlane) in ways only possible in the comic book genre. Whether it is with speech bubbles, mise-en-page, or through comic existentialism, Mahler creates scenarios that are both alienating and hilarious. Also noteworthy is Nicolas Mahler’s *Der Weltverbesserer*, a portable play drawn (and directed) as a masterful performance.

In addition, Mahler’s autobiographical comic book, *Franz Kafka’s nonstop Lachmaschine*, continues to utilize various narrative techniques that create a comic full of self-reflectivity and self-reflexivity. He puts together a narrative without a plot, and a quad-paneled layout without gutters, to produce existential discussions about comic books. Literary adaptation is also present as he reduces many famous German and Austrian literary greats, such as Franz Kafka’s bug from *The Metamorphosis* or even Thomas Bernhard himself, into his minimalistic style. By doing so, Mahler transforms banal encounters into intertextual as well as metatextual discourses of unending nescience that aid him in achieving effects of alienation. Through sans paroles panels, his borderless title panels and emanata contrast, Mahler distances the reader and highlights disputes that plague his avatar in order to point out that a comic book is indeed a productive and alternative forum for discussing cultural and literary issues.

Whether it is Mahler’s distinct minimalistic style, his borderline tragic self-deprecating humor or his ability to interpret, reduce and adapt other literary scenes, including ones of himself into a comic book, it is clear that Mahler’s socio-cultural comedic satires have an unending wealth of insight that elevates not only his adapted works of canonized German and Austrian literary greats but also his own literary works. Mahler’s comics create a world of metatextuality combined with alienating moments. Mahler’s message to me is that comic books are indeed a legitimate form of literary expression. They are a literary form that uses artistic pictures in
comedic scenarios and, in the context of the German language, a form that is in need of further research and study.

In order to provide deeper understanding of Nicolas Mahler and his work, future research might seek out the portrayal of Mahler’s overt phallic representation in his artistic style, such as the elongated noses his avatars routinely have. Another is his phallocentric avatar paneling, that is, a perceived male avatar is always standing on the left of the panel. By placing these male avatars on the left side it grants the male priority in how the panels are read and overall perceived. Alternatively, another topic could address Nicolas Mahler’s reduced or absent plot in many of his comic books and comic strips.

Mahler’s work will continue to fascinate a readership that enjoys not only reading classic literature but having a good laugh, too. He will interest an American readership because his social critiques are direct, concise, and, most importantly, funny. Mahler reduces the time it takes to understand the many messages his works and adaptations contain. He makes the text more enjoyable through his post-modern deconstruction of great masters and their works while also subscribing to their critical world view.


<http://www.suhrkamp.de/autoren/nicolas_mahler_8478.html>.


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