

## Visualising an Oral Epic: Lobačev's Comic Book Tsar Dušan's Wedding\*

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**Summary.** This study analyses visual and verbal material found in Đorđe Lobačev's comic book *Tsar Dušan's Wedding* (orig. *Ženidba Cara Dušana* [1989]) using a set of tools coming from the domains of intersemiotic translation, intermediality, and adaptation. The comic book is based on the Serbian oral epic ballad *Dušan's Wedding* (orig. *Ženidba Dušanova* [1815/1975]), which focuses on the hero wedding theme. The study will try to present verbal and graphic devices used to transfer the epic narrative to the medium of comics and compare them to the ones used in the original story. It will also address the aspect of the epic ballad structure and its transposition into the realm of comics. The analysis will take into account the historical context of the comic book in question and compare the findings with some of the results of contemporary comics studies dealing with certain graphic devices employed in comics. These findings reveal that Lobačev's comic book contains certain graphic flourishes related to describing motion, speed and spatiality, but lacks the ones used to depict affect, which is in line with basic traits of oral epic poetry.

**Keywords.** Comics, oral epic, wedding theme, intersemiotic translation, medial transposition, adaptation

**Zusammenfassung.** Dieser Artikel untersucht das visuelle und sprachliche Material in Đorđe Lobačevs Comic *Kaiser Dušans Hochzeit* (Orig. *Ženidba Cara Dušana* [1989]). Die Analyse folgt Methoden aus der Forschung zur intersemiotischen Übersetzung, zur Intermedialität und zur Adaptation. Das Comicheft basiert auf der serbischen epischen Volksballade *Dušans Hochzeit* (Orig. *Ženidba Dušanova* [1815/1975]), die die Hochzeit des Helden thematisiert. Der Artikel stellt sprachliche und grafische Mittel dar, die die epische Erzählung ins Medium des Comics übertragen, und vergleicht sie mit denjenigen des Originals. Die Struktur der Volksballade wird ebenso diskutiert wie ihre Übertragung auf und in den Comic. Die Analyse zieht auch den historischen Kontext des betreffenden Comichefts in Betracht und vergleicht die Ergebnisse mit einigen gegenwärtigen Ansätzen der Forschung zu grafischen Verfahren im Comic. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Lobačevs Comic bestimmte grafische Verzierungen enthält, die mit der

Beschreibung von Bewegung, Geschwindigkeit und Räumlichkeit zusammenhängen. Es fehlen jedoch diejenigen, die zur Darstellung von Affekt verwendet werden, was im Einklang mit den grundlegenden Merkmalen der mündlichen epischen Dichtung steht.

**Schlüsselwörter.** Comics, mündliche Epik, Hochzeit, intersemiotische Übersetzung, mediale Transposition, Adaptation

## 1. Introduction: Study rationale, focus and outline

Using findings from the realms of intermediality, intersemiotic translation, and adaptation, this study analyses visual and verbal material found in Đorđe Lobačev's<sup>1</sup> comic book *Tsar Dušan's Wedding* (orig. *Ženidba Cara Dušana* [1989]), which is based on the Serbian oral epic of a similar name – *Dušan's Wedding* (orig. *Ženidba Dušanova*<sup>2</sup> [1815/1975]) – and focuses on the hero wedding theme. It belongs to the Pre-Kosovo cycle (orig. *Pretkosovski ciklus*), which includes epics about events that predate the Battle of Kosovo (1389). The study will try to present verbal and graphic devices used to transfer the epic narrative to the medium of comics and compare them to the devices used in the original story.

We will look at this artefact as an example of medial transposition, or transformation of one media product into another medium, understood as a concept of a narrative that exists in different media regardless of the novelty of the adaptation. The analysis will also take into account the historical context of the comic book in question (pre-WWII) and compare the findings with some of the research results of contemporary comics studies. The subject matter of Lobačev's work represents a visual rendition of a popular Serbian oral epic, which is in its own way a highly specific form of creative expression, as it follows a specific narrative formula, among other things. With this in mind, we will also look at the ways in which this formula is transferred from the realm of the epic ballad to the comic book. We will keep track of transmedial processes in portraying each of these aspects, with a special focus on how the coherence between the elements of the traditional oral epic formula was maintained in the process of transforming the examined epic into a comic book, which uses a different semiotic toolkit.

We will start by outlining the most notable differences between the two works, which include, among others, the modernisation of language and its adaptation to the assumed preferences of the target audience, the omission and addition of certain narrative elements, as well as changes in the tone of storytelling, specifically the lack of explicit violence in the comic book. We will also examine in detail how page layout is employed by the artist to propel the narrative and how it differs in rhythm to the strict decasyllabic structure of the source material, which was traditionally sung with the accompaniment of the *gusle*, a single-stringed instrument. Furthermore, particular attention will be paid to the use of colour in the comic book

(added in the 1989 special edition), primarily in the instances where it is utilised for emphasis, and the ways in which readers can recognise such artistic intentions. Preliminary results reveal that Lobačev's comic contains some graphic devices related to describing motion, speed and spatiality, but lacks the ones used to depict affect, which is in line with the basic traits of oral epic poetry. Exploring all of these aspects of the examined adaptation of a monomodal source material – as we will show – to a multimodal media product will allow us to draw parallels between the likely perception and interpretation of both versions.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The present analysis is grounded in several theoretical constructs. First, we will take a look at Jakobson's (1959: 233) intersemiotic translation, as one of the three ways of interpreting a verbal sign, where words are translated using a nonverbal sign system, in our case images. Then, we will delve deeper into the relation between the different media of the original text and the comic book by examining the concept of intermediality, both in its wider sense, as any type of relation between two or more media, and its narrower sense, which focuses on "concrete medial configurations and their specific intermedial qualities" (Rajewsky 2005: 51). Finally, as this is, indeed, a case of adaptation of one media product into another (or we could even argue one media product into another into yet another, as we will see later on), the paper will turn to the adaptation process itself, with a particular emphasis on adapting other texts into the comics format. This eclectic approach will reflect the complexity that comes with the study of comics in the first place – many studies stress the overall heterogeneity of this research field and note that many theories and methods have been brought in and adapted for various purposes in comics studies (see Bramlett et al. 2017; Smith and Duncan 2017; Packard et al. 2019). We hope to go beyond the confines of a single and a purely linguistic perspective (for a criticism of narrow linguistics-based approaches, see Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014).

When discussing the interpretation of verbal signs, Jakobson (1959: 233) differentiates between three kinds of translation. The first is the process of interpreting verbal signs of one language by means of other verbal signs of that same language, called *intralingual translation*, a rewording usually through synonyms or circumlocution. If verbal signs are rendered through verbal signs of a different language, we are dealing with translation proper, or what Jakobson dubs "*interlingual translation*". If, however, verbal signs are interpreted by a system of nonverbal signs, for example, a visual language as in the present case, such a process is labelled "*intersemiotic translation*" or "*transmutation*". Interestingly, Eco (2003) believes that the term "translation" in Jakobson's third type is, in fact, metaphorical, thus he opts for "*intersemiotic conversion*" as a term that more accurately describes the process at hand. Furthermore,

recent research has drawn attention to the fact that translation between different semiotic systems does not need to be limited to linguistic systems, but may include transmutations between all kinds of media including cinema, theatre, visual arts and others (Dusi 2015: 182). This broadening of the term “intersemiotic translation”, which now also encompasses not exclusively linguistic semiotic resources (e.g. Kourdis and Yoka 2014; O’Halloran et al. 2016), has led many to connect intersemiotic translation to other concepts from translation studies, such as adaptation, multimodality, audiovisual translation, etc.

For instance, an adaptation of one media product into another can be considered as an act of translation where one sign system undergoes intersemiotic transposition into a different sign system (Tsui 2012), or where different signs and conventions are used to transcode and transmute (Hutcheon 2013). There are examples of intersemiotic translation actually yielding new forms perhaps better suited for conveying the messages found in original works: Perteghella (2019) illustrates this by using poetry podcasts that engage the listener in the orality and aurality of poetry, and filmic poetry or video poems that can bring forth the visual, iconic elements of poetry. Other examples include the application of digital technologies in the analysis of poems that increase our appreciation of poetry (Alghadeer 2014). Pârlog (2019) discusses the relation between intersemiotic translation and multimodality, stating that the latter is based on different types of signs and symbols and the ways in which they are intertwined, and concluding that intersemiotic translation can make knowledge more accessible to those that find it difficult to grasp it in its original form. Other applications of intersemiotic translation include audiovisual translation (Taylor 2020) and creating book illustrations (Pereira 2008) and book covers (Sonzogni 2011). O’Halloran et al. (2016) focus on the difficulties of analysing and modelling intersemiotic translation, emphasising the need for introducing various computational methods, such as multimodal annotation software, visualisation techniques or mathematical modelling, in order to tackle the issues that might arise in such procedures.

As, in this case, we are dealing with an adaptation that traverses different media, it is paramount that we take a closer look into the ways in which these media (and others as well) relate to each other. The analysed material, in fact, represents an extension of a narrative from the medium of oral poetry, via its written form recorded, most probably, centuries after the creation of the original work, to the medium of comics, which serves as our main point of interest in this study. With that in mind, what follows is a brief overview of the concept of intermediality, which can serve as background for the present analysis. Intermediality is a rather wide and variously defined term, yet we can start from Jensen’s (2016: 972) understanding of it as “the interconnectedness of modern media of communication”. Put this way, intermediality covers a number of different relations between media, and Jensen goes on to group them into three distinctive categories: (i) ‘discursive intermediality’, which implies simultaneous communication through several dis-

courses and modalities, (ii) ‘material intermediality’, where the focus is on different material vehicles of representation, and (iii) ‘institutional intermediality’, which describes the interplay between media as institutions.

Further, Schröter (2011) proposes four types of intermediality based on the discourse in which it can be found. Thus one may find (i) ‘synthetic intermediality’, in which different media are fused together, (ii) ‘formal’ or ‘trans-medial intermediality’, where formal structures are present in different media, (iii) ‘transformational intermediality’, meaning one medium is represented through another, and (iv) ‘ontological intermediality’, where what comes first is the intermedial relation between two or more media rather than any one of those media themselves. Some authors even go so far as to describe the medium of comics as intermedial in its essence (Rajewsky 2005; Rippl and Etter 2013; Stein 2015), since it is a combination of two distinct media (text and image). However, if we turn to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 21–22), who define modes as semiotic resources employed in the realisation of discourses and interactions on the one hand, and media as material resources used in the creation of semiotic products and events on the other, we can conclude that the medium of comics is better explained as multimodal and not intermedial. There are at least two semiotic modes present in comics, the verbal (written text) and the pictorial (drawings), and Kukkonen (2011: 35) even argues that sequence can be taken as the third mode. Thus, meaning in comics is made and communicated via its multimodality, while the theory of intermediality can be applied to comics when a connection has been established with a different medium.

This connection can be seen more clearly in Rajewsky’s (2005: 51–53) definition of intermediality in the narrow sense, where this concept is used in order to analyse texts and other media products. If we are to direct our attention to concrete medial configurations, as Rajewsky suggests, we can divide intermediality in this narrow sense into three subcategories. The first is ‘medial transposition’, where a product is transformed from one medium into another, as is the case in our analysis. The second is ‘media combination’, in which different media are integrated into a single product, such as in film, theatre, opera and others. Finally, the third subcategory is what Rajewsky calls ‘intermedial references’, e.g. references in film to painting, or in painting to photography, and so on. We will be focusing on the first subcategory, examining the analysed comic book both as an instance of intersemiotic translation and medial transposition.

The changes that are introduced by Đorđe Lobačev, which occur with the narrative being transformed from the “telling mode” of the ballad to the “showing mode” of the comic book (Hutcheon 2013: 22), are all parts of a *adaptation proper*, a process which implies a number of informing and deforming constraints dictated by the intrinsic configuration of the comics medium (Gaudreault and Marion 2004: 58). One should also bear in mind that the original text had gone through further processes of adaptation prior to it being tackled by Lobačev, since the ballad itself had first existed as an oral epic passed down from generation to generation for centu-

ries before finally being recorded in the written form by Vuk Karadžić in 1815 (according to Lobačev 1989). It was this second text that served as the source material for the comic book. Gaudreault and Marion (2004: 61) suggest that any process of adaptation has to take into account the “incarnations” inherent in the encounter between a story and a medium that are related to the materiality of the media. They discuss the conceptual categories of *mediativity* and *narrativity*, which are of great importance for the process of adaptation, with *mediativity* being particularly interesting for our approach as well. According to these authors, *mediativity* is “a medium’s intrinsic capacity to represent – and to communicate that representation” (Gaudreault and Marion 2004: 66). Regardless of the fact that this idea comes from Gaudreault and Marion’s treatment of stage performances, we believe that each medium has its own intrinsic capacity to represent something. Thus, *mediativity* is determined by the technical possibilities of the medium, or its internal semiotic configurations, which, in our case, would mean a combination of image and text. These specificities, in turn, result in the inevitable deletion or addition of material in the adaptation (Lefèvre 2007: 3–4), which will also be examined closely in the present study. In what follows, we will see how these theoretical underpinnings inform our analysis of the adaptation of an oral epic ballad into a comic book.

### 3. Methodology and materials

The present study contains the analysis of Đorđe Lobačev’s comic book *Tsar Dušan’s Wedding* (orig. *Ženidba cara Dušana*), first published in 1938, with a particular insight into the process of adaptation of the original epic ballad that served as the source material for the comic book. The ballad itself, titled *Dušan’s Wedding* (orig. *Ženidba Dušanova*), belongs to the Pre-Kosovo cycle (orig. *Pretkosovski ciklus*), which includes epics about events that predate the Battle of Kosovo (1389). The exact date or period of its creation is not known, but based on its themes, similar to other oral epics related to the persons and events prior to the Battle of Kosovo, it is most probably one of the oldest extant Serbian epics. It was finally written down in 1815 by Vuk Karadžić, who heard it from Tešan Podrugović, one of the most prolific Serbian oral poets and storytellers of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Perović and Vučković 2017). The recorded version originates from the region of Herzegovina and is, in fact, only one of several wedding ballads recorded by Vuk Karadžić as performed by Tešan Podrugović (Mitić 2017). These oral epics were traditionally (but not necessarily) sung with the accompaniment of the *gusle* (see Suvajdžić 2010), a single-stringed instrument. Tešan Podrugović was an exception to this rule, because he did not use the *gusle* in telling these stories but recited them with no musical background (consequently keeping the original medium monomodal). As is usually the case with this type of folk poetry, the epic also employs the strict decasyllabic structure that maintains the rhythm throughout the ballad, which



does not include any rhyming patterns. Thus, at least as far as the form is concerned, the analysed narrative has gone through two important adaptations, first by being transformed from its oral variant into the written text, changing the medium yet retaining the monomodal character<sup>3</sup>, and then followed by the adaptation of the written form into the multimodal medium of comics, which also involved an introduction of another mode, the pictorial one. This second adaptation is the subject of our study.

The comic book was first drawn in black and white and published in 1938, but later redrawn in 1976 from the author's memory after the first version was lost during WWII. Colour was added for the 1989 special edition.<sup>4</sup> This final edition is the one examined in this paper. We opted for the coloured edition of the comic book simply because colour represents one of the specific semiotic resources used by comics authors in their works, and as such adds yet another layer of meaning to the examined text, as we will see in the next section. The comic book is 24 pages long and represents a more concise version of the original narrative, which is why it served as the starting point for comparing the two texts.

Our analysis, which is primarily of a qualitative and descriptive type, was focused on three major lines of inquiry. The first dealt with comparing the structure of the original text and its adaptation by examining how their plotlines followed the hero wedding formula found in Serbian epic poetry (Petković 2019). This was done in an attempt to examine how true the comic remained to the oral ballad regarding this specific issue during the process of intersemiotic translation. In doing so, we also tried to assess the general level of fidelity (Kukkonen 2013: 80–85) of Lobačev's work to the source material. The second line of inquiry was further related to this, as it examined all the stylistic and narrative differences found in the two texts. In line with one of the challenges of adaptation listed by Lefèvre (2007: 3–4), that is, the problems that may occur during the deletion (omission) or addition of the material in the medial transposition of one media product to another, we paid special attention to the language and the narrative tone of the comic book compared to the ballad, and singled out the most important deviations in storytelling from the original text. Finally, the third point of interest covered various comics-related concerns such as page layout, use of colour, representation of speed and motion, and absence of graphic devices to depict affect. Here we drew on the work by Cohn (2013) and Forceville (2011), as well as some of our previous studies (Stamenković and Tasić 2014; Tasić and Stamenković 2017, 2022), to analyse the use of upfixes and pictorial runes in representing speed, motion and emotion in the comic book. We also consulted Groensteen (2013) in examining whether the rhythm of the comic book expressed in its page layout emulated the strict meter of the oral epic. All of these tools were integrated into an elaborate methodological approach with the aim of scrutinising this specific case of adaptation (or intersemiotic translation) in as many aspects as possible.

We proceeded with the analysis in the following manner. Having read both the ballad and the comic book, we first identified certain points of inter-

est in the comic book and then referred back to the ballad for comparison. This strategy was more efficient in our view, since the ballad contained a number of secondary plot threads not found in the comic, which was not the case vice versa. Our methodological approach comprised the following steps (steps 1 through 3 are related to the first two major lines of inquiry, while steps 4 through 7 are related to the third one, i.e. comics-specific resources):

1. Track and match the key structural elements of the two plotlines, with a particular focus on the space allocated to the different parts of the hero wedding formula;
2. Search for and compare any existing stylistic differences (language, tone, etc.);
3. Pinpoint the main narrative differences between the two texts by closely looking at both;
4. Study the page layout of the comic, particularly with its rhythmic structure in mind;
5. Examine the use of colour and its ability to emphasize certain elements;
6. Identify and analyse any graphic devices used to express speed and motion;
7. Identify and analyse any graphic devices used to express emotion.

Lastly, due to the rather short length of the comic book and the mainly qualitative and descriptive nature of the present study, no quantitative aspects were taken into consideration. All of the major lines of inquiry mentioned above will be addressed in the following section.

#### 4. Ballad and comic book structure and plot outline

The first point of comparison between the ballad and the comic book has to be their structure. Namely, just like many other forms of folk literature (see Thompson 1955–1958), the Serbian epic ballads were developed in accordance with one of several available ‘formulas’. The inventory of formulas of the Serbian epic ballads includes (i) protection of the weak and fight for justice, (ii) liberation, (iii) hero competitions, (iv) wedding, (v) family relations, (vi) social status, (vii) death of a hero, many of which have numerous variations (Petković 2019). *Dušan’s Wedding* obviously belongs to the wedding formula and its variation “wedding with obstacles”. Petković (2019: 84–85) observes that it is one of four ballads in which the main protagonist encounters obstacles both before and after taking the bride and one of only two ballads in which there are multiple obstacles before taking the bride. As such, the formula of *Dušan’s Wedding* includes the following elements: the proposal with negotiations and conditions set by the in-laws (includes the disguised fraud attempt and the detection of the fraud), the gathering of the wedding guests and the journey towards the bride’s home



(which initiates the wedding campaign), obstacles set by the in-laws before taking the bride, obstacles on the way back home (after taking the bride), and the arrival at the bridegroom's home. *Dušan's Wedding* also includes an uninvited hero as a saviour (which is an element borrowed from the liberation formula).

The comic book largely follows the formula employed by the ballad (and by the more general set of formulas from the oral epic tradition, as discussed above). It contains an opening page<sup>5</sup> which introduces six major characters: Tsar Dušan (the bridegroom), Miloš Vojinović (the main hero and protagonist), Roksanda (the bride), Balačko vojvoda (Miloš's most difficult obstacle), King Mihailo (Roksanda's father) and his mage counsellor (Mihailo and he are the main antagonists of the story). The remainder of the comic book renders the epic in a mostly consistent manner. We will track the key structural elements within the comic's panels. The proposal containing the negotiations process and conditions set by the in-laws opens the comic book: it includes all panels on the second page and the first three panels of the third page: here, Tsar Dušan sends out his envoy Todor to propose to Roksanda by negotiating the terms with Mihailo (called Mijailo in the original epic), King of Leđan (an imaginary city from South Slavic folklore). Roksanda's father sets the following condition: Tsar Dušan's nephews, the Vojinović brothers, are not to attend the wedding campaign and ceremony, as Mihailo claims they are trouble-makers (which is the disguised fraud attempt). The gathering of the wedding guests takes up a single panel (panel 5 on page 9[3], Fig. 1), in which we see them from the perspective of the Vojinović brothers.



Fig. 1. Wedding guests gather and set out towards Leđan. Lobačev (1989: 9).



**Fig. 2.** Wedding campaign obstacles before taking the bride. Lobačev (1989: 15, 18, 22).

The two elder Vojinović brothers (Vukašin and Petrašin) detect this as a fraud set by the villain Mihailo and, aided by their mother, summon the youngest brother, Miloš Vojinović, who, in the structure of the ballad, acts as an uninvited hero, or a hero in disguise. He then joins the wedding guests in the campaign, i.e. during their journey towards Leđan, and throughout most of the comic he appears in shepherd's robes and is addressed as Bugarče ('young Bulgarian') or Čobanče ('young shepherd'). The comic book continues to follow the formula, so the next part involves three obstacles set by the in-laws: first a duel against a hero designated by King Mihailo, second jumping over three horses carrying three flaming swords, and third recognising the bride among several women (Fig. 2).

The portrayal of these obstacles takes up nearly 11 pages (pages 13[7]–23[17]), dominating the comic book and thus foregrounding the action elements. Miloš Vojinović (still in disguise) volunteers to tackle all three obstacles and is successful. Once the bride is allowed to join the wedding guests on their way back home, two further obstacles occur, again arranged by the malicious King Mihailo. They are again packed with action and take up another 6 pages (24[18]–29[23]). The wedding procession is attacked by Balačko vojvoda, an extremely strong enemy, who is also defeated. This is followed by the attack of 600 members of armoured cavalry – here Miloš Vojinović is aided by his friends and they fight off the assault (Fig. 3). Finally, Miloš Vojinović reveals his identity and the campaign ends when the procession brings the bride to Tsar Dušan's castle. This is how the formula reaches a happy ending. In the closing panel

we see Miloš Vojinović travelling back to the mountains to continue his usual lifestyle. The conclusion of the comic book all happens on one page only (page 30[24]).



**Fig. 3.** Wedding campaign obstacles after taking the bride. Lobačev (1989: 25, 28).

The overview of the comic book's structure allows us to see some of the differences in the allocation of space to the different parts of the epic formula. The most notable difference is that the action-packed parts describing the obstacles and the manner in which they are surmounted take up around 45% of the ballad (313 out of 690 verses), while they cover as much as 70% of the comic book and more (17 out of 24 pages). Therefore, we can once again confirm, that the notion of action (most prominent in the scenes depicting fights), is much more prevalent in the comic book. This, of course, takes its toll on the rest of the structure – we have shown that the gathering of the wedding guests, traditionally seen as a separate element in the ballad formula, is presented in only one frame, whereas the whole conclusion of the epic occupies only one page of the comic book.

## 5. Major stylistic and narrative differences between the ballad and the comic book

### 5.1 *Changes in style*

One of the most important and conspicuous changes when it comes to stylistic differences is the modernisation of language and its adjustment to the contemporary audience. The decasyllabic verse of the original epic is also missing from the comic book, with the text now in prose, again to better suit the audience for which the comic book is intended. This change is perhaps most notably illustrated by the fact that the eponymous Tsar Dušan, exclusively addressed as such in the comic book, is never mentioned by that name in the ballad, where he is only known as Stjepan, a moniker derived from his full name Stefan Uroš IV Dušan. Stjepan is the version of his first

name most likely used in Herzegovina, the birthplace of the poet Tešan Podrugović, who recited the epic to Vuk Karadžić. Even back in the 1930s, the name Stjepan would not resonate with the target audience, primarily comprising children and adolescents. The 1976 version and its coloured 1989 edition were even further removed from the original text, and the initial change was retained in them as well.

Another important adaptation to the target audience concerns the tone of the narration and the absence of explicit violence found throughout the epic ballad. Probably due to its graphic form being intended for younger readers (the coloured 1989 version was published by a renowned Yugoslav children's publishing company *Children's newspapers* [orig. *Dečje novine*]), Lobačev opted to leave out any scenes of explicit violence, which are explained in detail in the ballad. If he had tried to maintain an extremely high level of fidelity in his adaptation, the graphic nature of the ballad would have made the comic book unsuitable for Lobačev's target audience. Therefore, certain key moments in the plot that include violence in the ballad are represented in the comic book in such a way that actual violence takes place off-panel, while a number of other, arguably gratuitous violent scenes included in the ballad are completely absent from the comic. Even though the epic itself is taught to primary schoolchildren in its unabridged form, it is clear that a faithful visual representation of all the details of its storyline would simply be deemed too graphic for children that age.

## 5.2 *Changes in narration*

Three significant differences occur in the storytelling. The first is the introduction of a mage-like character who serves as counsellor to King Mihailo, the antagonist. This is accompanied by the omission of the Queen, whose place alongside the King is now occupied by the mage, who remains unnamed throughout the comic book, and whose appearance (as can be seen in Fig. 6, bottom right) is reminiscent of certain popular representations of the wizard Merlin, complete with long grey hair and beard, a dark blue robe and a pointed hat with crescent moons and stars of different shapes and sizes. Even though the ballad itself contains several fantastic elements, no such wizard can be found in the Serbian oral epic tradition, and his addition to the comic book is most probably inspired by the popularity of similar characters in comics and cartoons of the time, particularly the ones found in Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, which was launched only a year or so before Lobačev's comic book. Even though Lobačev did not mention any such influence in the introduction to the 1989 edition (he speaks only of being influenced by American detective comics and Disney), we believe that this connection between the two comics can further be corroborated by the fact that the story's protagonist, Miloš Vojinović, has an almost identical haircut as Prince Valiant (Fig. 4).





**Fig. 4.** Prince Valiant (left) and Miloš Vojinović (right). Foster (2013: 52); Lobačev (1989: 10).

The other important difference lies in the role that the robes worn by Miloš Vojinović play in the source material and the lack of such relevance in the comic book. In the ballad, Miloš's shepherd clothing and his wedding guest attire underneath serve a more prominent purpose than a mere disguise. They represent a major narrative tool that introduces the duality of the character who is both a shepherd and a nobleman, which, in fact, allows him to overcome all the obstacles put before him. The point in the story at which the hero removes his shepherd clothing to reveal the elegant garb beneath also differs, taking place in the ballad in the narratively charged moment of the recognition of the bride, as opposed to the very last page of the comic book, when Miloš reveals his true identity to Tsar Dušan. Đorđe Lobačev must have again changed this detail with an eye for his intended audience, who would perhaps need a more detailed explanation of the metaphorical and symbolic meaning of the different types of robes worn by the protagonist, which would in turn require more space than the rather short length of this comic.

Finally, the fantastic three-headed character of Balačko vojvoda, the strongest of Miloš's enemies, is slightly altered. In the epic, he is a more articulate character, who is familiar with the hero and acts accordingly, whereas he does not seem to recognise the protagonist at all in the comic book. Before he appears in the narrative in person, he is portrayed in the ballad as having three heads, spewing cerulean flames from one and icy winds from the other, with no mention of the purpose of the third head. In the comic book, probably with the aim of preparing for a more graphically

powerful impression on readers, he is first described to the King by the mage as having a specific ‘power’ (blizzard, fire and wind) in each one of his three heads, which are then colour-coded for added effect on the next page when Balačko appears for the first time (see Fig. 6, left). This change affects the narrative less than the other two, though it may still be attributed to the process of adaptation.

## 6. Semiotic resources not available in the original text

In this part of our analysis, we will examine those aspects of the comics medium that cannot be found in the original text and that are closely related to the multimodal nature of comics. We will look in detail how page layout is employed by Đorđe Lobačev to drive the narrative forward and how the choice of panel arrangements differs in rhythm from the strict decasyllabic structure of the source material. Even though a substantial majority of pages follow the dominant page layout, we were not able to detect any rhythmic regularities that could perhaps indicate a significant level of fidelity to the structure of the epic ballad. Another specific affordance of the medium is the use of colour which conveys the creator’s specific artistic intentions. Besides all this, the final point of interest in this part of analysis lies in the manner in which the author applies certain graphic devices describing motion, speed and spatiality, such as speed and motion lines, but forgoes the use of others that would emphasize affect, such as upfixes (Cohn 2013) or pictorial runes (Forceville 2011; Tasić and Stamenković 2017). This decision can be seen as mirroring a basic trait of oral epic poetry, which tends to eschew overt displays of emotion.

### 6.1 Page layout

As already mentioned above, the page layout of the comic book is uniform for the most part, excluding three pages that contain, in their order of appearance in the comic, a sort of visual *dramatis personae* at the very beginning (page 7[1]), a single-panel page showing Miloš Vojinović overcoming one of the obstacles (page 18[12], middle panel in Fig. 2), and a two-panel page depicting the final battle between Miloš’s and Balačko’s cavalries (page 28[22]). The remaining 21 pages follow a more or less stable pattern (e.g. page 10[4], Fig. 5), albeit with a varying number of panels (from five to eight), which leads us to believe that there is no clearly intended rhythm that would be evocative of the decasyllabic structure of the source material. In Groensteen’s (2013: 135–138) terms, the beat of the multiframe in the comic does not match the strict rhythm of the poem, and Lobačev’s constant slight changes in the number and positioning of panels seem to renounce the fixed metric form of regular layout that would be taken as perhaps truer to the original.





Fig. 5. An example of the typical page layout. Lobačev (1989: 10).

As can be seen from the above Figure, pages often contain entirely textual panels (not counted here as panels proper) that further the narrative and serve as a bridge between two panels either divided by a longer period of time or happening at two separate locations. In addition to the varying number of panels per page, the panels, though angular, do not follow a strict grid (Fig. 5). This contributes to the action-packed narrative by providing a sense of constant haste and motion. Everything seems even more lively and almost dynamic in an inherently static medium. Nevertheless, all of this distances the comic book even further from the epic ballad in terms of the immanent pace of storytelling, where changes in both rhythm and tempo, reinforced by the distinct page layout, appear much more prominent in the comic book, adding a new layer to the text.

## 6.2 Use of colour

The special 1989 coloured edition of the comic book introduces another dimension to the meaning-making process of the adaptation. The comic book was originally drawn in black and white and published in the Serbian newspaper *Politika* in 1938, while colour was added some 50 years after that. Bearing in mind that *Tsar Dušan's Wedding* was not originally conceived as a colour comic, our focus here will primarily be on how Lobačev's artwork employs colours as means of emphasis of specific physical manifestations, on the one hand, and of certain personality traits, on the other.



Fig. 6. Use of colour for emphasis. Lobačev (1989: 12, 14, 24).<sup>6</sup>

The left panel in Fig. 6 (page 24[18], panel 1) represents the first appearance of the character of Balačko vojvoda, the three-headed nemesis of the ballad's hero, Miloš Vojinović. We have already described that each of the heads possesses a particular 'power', and Lobačev here uses colour to accentuate the exact nature of those powers. The leftmost head, from the reader's perspective, is coloured icy blue to indicate that it spews blizzard, as will be seen later on in the comic (see Fig. 3, left). The middle head spews cerulean flame, and the rightmost is supposed to blow strong winds. The choice of colours for these latter two heads might be a bit confusing at first, since the reddest one would probably be more readily associated with fire, but the fact that the flames coming out of the middle head are coloured in

sky blue and orange, fitting the description as cerulean in the source text, justifies the use of orange for the fire head, while the red colour of the wind head might simply imply the consequences of the extra effort of producing gusts of wind. What is also important is that none of the colours used for the heads match the colour of Balačko's arms, which only further supports the interpretation of the application of colours as calculated. The top right panel in Fig. 6 (page 14[8], panel 1) may offer another explanation for the use of red in the wind head, as we can see a town crier making a public pronouncement from the top of his lungs, his face red from all the strain of shouting and emitting a great amount of air in the process. Again, colour is used to emphasise a physical manifestation of sorts, and to facilitate the reader's understanding of the image. The realism of the scene is expressed not only through the wide open mouth and closed eyes, unchanged from the original black-and-white version, but also through Lobačev's colouring technique. Finally, the bottom right panel in Fig. 6 (page 12[6], panel 5), illustrates another type of emphasis, which is more metaphorical in character. Here, certain personality traits are hinted at by colours conventionally used to indicate malevolence or ill intent. The mage can be seen both in the bottom right panel in Fig. 6, where his countenance is predominantly grey, and in the left panel, where it takes on a greenish hue. Both of these colours can be associated with envy and moral decay, and the juxtaposition of the mage's visage against all other characters' faces, barring Balačko vojvoda, of course, clearly underscores his wicked intentions as the character that comes up with all the different obstacles put before the hero in the comics adaptation, though completely absent in the original.

### 6.3 *Speed and motion*

One of the most challenging tasks for any comics artist is to try and succeed in depicting motion in what is intrinsically a static medium. If the work at hand is additionally intended to be part of the action genre, where speed and movement are some of the basic characteristics, this task becomes even more important for its eventual felicity. The artist here draws on two techniques to represent motion and speed of movement.

First (Fig. 7, left), he uses speed and motion lines to indicate action in panel 3 on page 16[10]. Such lines (Forceville 2011; Tasić and Stamenković 2017) are graphic devices that come in different shapes, sizes, and positions, yet all with the intention of implying motion paths (trajectory lines) and the velocity at which a movement occurs. They are usually drawn as extensions of the person or the object that is supposed to be moving in the depicted scene, or adjacent to them, as is the case in motion lines marking the position previously occupied. The example from Fig. 6 illustrates this by employing two lines as an extension of Miloš Vojinović's arm as he swings his mace in an attempt to hit the runaway knight. The two lines show the motion path of the hero's hand, but also accentuate the speed at which this



movement is happening. Furthermore, the curved lines that contour the clouds of dust rising behind the galloping adversaries are not merely used to delineate dust but can at once be read as motion lines that show the direction in which the dust is moving. Another technique is exemplified in the right panel in Fig. 7 (page 13[7], panel 5), where Lobačev's realistic style comes to the fore. Namely, the banners hanging from the heralds' trumpets appear to be suspended in the midst of fluttering, while the varying extent to which they are displaced from their resting position further evokes the possible real-life unfolding of such a scene. These graphic devices are present throughout the comic book and their subtle use by the artist enhances the experience of the action-oriented narrative.



Fig. 7. Speed and motion. Lobačev (1989: 13, 16).

#### 6.4 Graphic devices depicting affect

There are different ways in which comics artists can attempt to vividly depict affect in their work. Apart from the obvious choice, which would be to draw characters as realistically as possible, artists have a number of comics-specific tools at their disposal, including upfixes (Cohn 2013) and pictorial runes (Forceville 2011; Tasić and Stamenković 2017). These may include squiggly or straight lines, spirals, twirls, droplets of liquid, etc., drawn either in a halo-like fashion around a character's head or as singular graphic decorations usually appearing above a character and indicating various emotions such as anxiety, anger, surprise, fear, etc. Unlike the previously described speed and motion lines, which are all-present, the absence of these affective graphic devices in this comic book is striking. Most probably due to his realistic style the artist relies fully on facial expressions and expressive anatomy in trying to convey emotive meaning to his audience. Even so, such explicit depictions of emotions are rare, and the occasional smile or frown are nearly the only communications of the characters' emotional states.

Apart from the fit to the artist's style, we believe that the subdued expression of emotional content can also be seen as fitting the basic traits of Serbian oral epic poetry, which focuses more on events than on emotions. In the process of transmutation or intermedial transposition from the epic ballad to the comic book, this appears to be one of the aspects in which a very high level of fidelity was maintained.

## 7. Conclusions

The present study attempted to trace the process of adapting an oral epic ballad into a comic book. As we have seen, the original oral epic was first transferred into the written form, which later served as the source material for the comic book created by Đorđe Lobačev, one of the founding fathers of the Serbian school of comics. We have tried to examine this process by drawing on a number of theoretical concepts to link the original text and its comics adaptation. The comic is a product of intersemiotic translation or transmutation, as it uses its own pictorial sign system to interpret the verbal signs of the epic ballad. It can also be seen as an instance of medial transposition, since the process of adaptation actually transforms one media product into another, establishing an intermedial connection between the two texts.

More closely, we have observed the structural similarities and differences between the ballad and the comic, concluding that the latter follows the hero wedding formula from the former, albeit with a greater emphasis on the action aspect of the plot. A similar comparative analysis of other stylistic and narrative elements has revealed some major differences, which primarily stem from the artist's desire to adjust the narrative to the taste of the comic book's intended audience. These variations include, above all, the modernisation of the language and the less violent representation of certain events from the ballad, in an attempt to bring the original text to modern, mainly younger, readers. The observed changes in some of the characters in the comic were also probably made for the same reasons. As for the specific semiotic resources available only in the comics adaptation and not in the ballad, we have seen how the artist uses specific page layouts and colouring techniques to emphasise particular storytelling aspects and create a more dramatic impact on his readers. The absence of some other graphic devices, such as upfixes or pictorial runes, which are often used in comics to depict affect, is equally striking. We suggest that this is in line with the source material, which is known for its rather sparse depiction of emotions.

Directions for further research could be provided by Đorđe Lobačev's diverse body of work, either by choosing similar source material and comparing the process of adaptation to the present analysis, or by looking into other types and genres of original texts adapted by Lobačev into comic books. Furthermore, there are other Serbian comics artists (e.g. Petar

Meseldžija, Mijat Mijatović, Nikola Mitrović – Kokan) who have done similar adaptations and whose procedures can be compared to Lobačev's. Lastly, using a more formal discourse analysis approach (e.g. based on Kamp and Reyle 1993; Asher and Lascarides 2003) to investigate comparable stretches of discourse from the oral epic ballad and the comic book could reveal additional facets of similarities and differences between the two portrayals of same events.

## Notes

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- 1 Đorđe Lobačev (Yuriy Lobachev; 1909–2002) was a famed Soviet Russian and Serbian-Yugoslav author, known as “the father of Serbian comics”. He began publishing comics in 1935, and was one of the first comics artists in pre-WWII Yugoslavia. His series *Bloody Inheritance* (orig. *Krvavo nasledstvo*) was, in fact, the second ever published Serbian comic. More importantly, he was the first author who consciously tried to steer away from foreign influences in Serbian comics at the time, and the first to choose a local theme as a backdrop for his work, which became his most invaluable contribution to the school of Serbian comics (Grujičić 2002).
- 2 The epic was first translated into English by Geoffrey N. W. Locke as *Tsar Dushan's Wedding* in the anthology *The Serbian epic ballads* (1997). That is why we have decided to retain the original title of *tsar*, which designates East and South Slavic monarchs, instead of using its Western European counterpart *emperor*.
- 3 With regard to our claim that the oral epic is monomodal and does not contain any additional separate modes, such as rhythmic structure, for example, we consider rhythm and other similar aspects here to be part of the verbal mode, the same way colour is part of the pictorial mode in our analysis.
- 4 Apart from the fact that the author redrew his original work at the request of Žika Bogdanović, one of the most important Serbian theoreticians of comics and visual narration in general, and the then director of the “Yugoslavia” publishing company (Lobačev 1989: 4), to the best of our knowledge, there are no mentions of any specific differences between the two versions of the comic book. The colour was later added to make the comic more appealing to the new generation of readers.
- 5 The page numbering used in the paper follows the numbering from the source material, which is a collection of Lobačev's works published under the title *Tracking the folk imagination* (orig. *Tragom narodne mašte*) that contains the examined comic. Where pertinent to the analysis, the actual pages of the comic book itself are given in square brackets.



- 6 Due to printing constraints, the original coloured images are only available in the online publication.

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## Image Sources

- Fig. 1. Lobačev (1989: 9).
- Fig. 2. Lobačev (1989: 15, 18, 22).
- Fig. 3. Lobačev (1989: 25, 28).
- Fig. 4. Foster (2013: 52); Lobačev (1989: 10).
- Fig. 5. Lobačev (1989: 10).
- Fig. 6. Lobačev (1989: 12, 14, 24).
- Fig. 7. Lobačev (1989: 13, 16).

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