RESEARCH

The Task of Manga Translation: *Akira* in the West

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Translated editions of Katsuhiro Ōtomo's manga *Akira* played an important role in the popularisation of manga in the Western world. Published in Japan between 1982 and 1990, editions in European languages followed as soon as the late 1980s. In the first US edition (Epic 1988–1995) the originally black and white manga was printed in colour and published in 38 issues, which were designed not unlike typical American comic books. The first German edition (Carlsen 1991–1996) marked the beginning of Carlsen's manga publishing efforts. It was based on the English-language edition and also printed in colour, and combined two American issues in one.

This article analyses the materiality of these two translated editions with a focus on three main issues – the mirroring (or 'flipping') which changes the reading direction from right-to-left into left-to-right, the colouring of the originally black and white artwork, and the translation of different kinds of script (sound effects, speech bubble text, and inscriptions or labels) – before concluding with a brief examination of their critical reception.

Keywords: colouring; flipping; manga; reception; translation

In his seminal essay on 'the task of the translator' (1923), Walter Benjamin distinguished between *sense* ('Sinn') and *form* ('Form') of the source text. Benjamin suggests that translators should primarily be concerned with transferring the latter into the target language. However, Benjamin argues that "true translation is translucent, it doesn't conceal the original", and that translators need to "extend the confines" of the target language (my translation).

Benjamin did not have comics in mind when he wrote this, but if we want to apply his translation theory to comics, we need to think about how the non-scriptorial elements of comics might fit into it. Similar to the *sense* of written texts, there are

elements in comics that can (or should) not be easily altered much in the translation process: the line drawings in the panels as a whole and their sequence which combines them into a narrative.

Other elements in comics are more feasibly and readily altered in the translation process and thus might be regarded as corresponding to the *form* of written texts: as we will see, these include the physical form of the printed comic, the colouring and the orientation of the images, as well as parts of the line drawings themselves such as inscriptions. In fact, Benjamin demands of translators to carefully re-create ('*Umdichtung*') the form of the source, in order to convey its mode of meaning ('*Art des Meinens*') rather than to focus on the meaning itself.

Comic translators are always faced with the decision between foreignising and naturalising translation (Howell 2001). Naturalising means creating a result that reads as if it was an original, whereas foreignisation emphasises the fact that the result is a translation. Benjamin, with his call for 'translucent' translations, seems to favour foreignisation. On the other hand, Casey Brienza attributes part of the success of manga in 21st-century USA to hybridised editions that had been all but stripped of their 'Japaneseness' (2009). American manga publishers, Brienza says, have started using the term 'manga' only to disassociate their product from the traditional notion of comics in the US, so that manga could 'migrate into the book field' instead, which was key to the American manga boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It would now be of interest to see if these notions of translation quality played any role at all in the success of particular manga translation instances.

In this article the first English-language edition and the first German edition of Katsuhiro Ōtomo's manga *Akira* are compared to each other and to the Japanese original. English was the first European language into which this manga was translated, which justifies the relevance of this edition. The first German edition, on the other hand, was published later and in the same year (1991) as the first French, Italian, and Spanish editions (according to the online catalogues of the corresponding national libraries at <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/>, <http://opac.sbn.it>, and <http://catalogo.bne.es>, respectively). Thus, the German edition of *Akira* was selected as an object

of comparison in this article for rather arbitrary or practical reasons. The translated editions of *Akira* in general are worthwhile objects of study in the context of Western (meaning here primarily Northern American and European) manga reception, as it was *Akira* which arguably paved the way for the breakthrough of manga in the West in the 1990s. However, the verification of this claim is not within the scope of this article (see, for example, de la Iglesia 2014).

Before turning to the translated editions, some words about the publication history of *Akira* in Japan might be in order. *Akira* was first published in serialised chapters of approximately 20 pages length in the fortnightly manga periodical *Young Magazine* (ヤングマガジン) by well-known manga publisher Kōdansha (Ōtomo 2007). The first episode appeared in 1982, but the final episode wasn't published until eight years later, in 1990. The reason for the length of this run was a hiatus in 1987 and 1988, due to author Katsuhiro Ōtomo's being occupied with the adaptation of his comic into an animated film, in which he was involved as director, screenwriter, and storyboard artist. In 1984, the first volume of a six-volume collected edition appeared in Japan. This collected edition, rather than the magazine serialisation, is the one used for comparisons between translations and the 'Japanese original' in this article. In total, *Akira* amounts to almost 2200 pages. Due to its length and complexity, a description of this comic in general and a summary of its plot are not offered here. It would take up too much space to situate each example in this article within the narrative; furthermore, plot-related aspects are not relevant in the context of this article.

In 1988, the first *Akira* volume by US publisher Epic – which was in fact an imprint of Marvel Comics, not an independent publishing house – appeared. This book is 16.8 centimetres wide and 25.6 centimetres high. Thus its width and height come close to the dimensions of the Japanese collected edition (which are slightly wider), but even closer to those of a standard US comic book. Compared to such a regular American comic book, the Epic *Akira* issues are almost three times longer, at approximately 60 pages. Therefore, these *Akira* volumes are square bound rather than stapled. Thus the book cover, which consists of cardboard – in contrast to the

paper cover of standard comic books –, forms a spine of 4–5 millimetres width. The 38th and final issue appeared in 1995.

The workflow that was employed for the Epic edition of *Akira* (which is described in the bonus pages at the back of issues #13–15) started with Ōtomo's studio Mash·Room in Japan – not Epic in the US – removing from the pages of the manga all speech bubble lettering, the speech bubbles themselves, the sound effects, and completing the underlying drawings. Most pages were then mirrored (also known as flipping or flopping) so that the panels could be read in Western reading direction from left to right, instead of the usual Japanese reading order from right to left. New speech bubbles for horizontally written script were inserted, and only then were the pages sent to Epic.

The text was already translated by the Japanese publisher Kōdansha from Japanese into English. An editor at Epic then 'americanized' this text, because 'the direct, literal translation is often stiff' (Ōtomo 1988–1995: issues #13–15). Furthermore, this editor, Jo Duffy, is quoted, 'An idea that takes three words in Japanese may take 10 or 20 words in English.' This americanised script was then proofread by Kōdansha in Tokyo and afterwards transferred into the speech bubbles by letterer Michael Higgins in the US. The readily lettered pages were then once more submitted to Kōdansha to check.

The last major step in the production was the colouring of the pages, which had been, as usual in Japan, printed in black and white. For this purpose, the American colourist of this edition, Steve Oliff, first made hand-coloured sketches. These sketches were also checked by Ōtomo and Kōdansha. According to those sketches, Oliff and the five employees of his company, Olyoptics, then transferred the colours onto the comic pages using a computer. From this computer data, the film was made from which the printing company printed the comic. What was new about this method of comic colouring back then was that two steps were combined into one. The intellectual and artistic selection of the colours, i.e. the colouring in a narrower sense, and the rather mechanical assignment of tonal values to areas on the comic page, the so-called colour separation, were now carried out by the same person, or at least the same small group of people. Before this computerised process, these two steps were usually carried out separately by two different persons.

Volume #1 of the first German *Akira* edition appeared in 1991, i.e. at a time when the comic was already completed in Japanese, but not in English. Until 1996, publishing house Carlsen published the whole comic in 19 volumes under its imprint 'Edition ComicArt'. Each volume was approximately 110–120 pages long, that means, usually two US comic books were combined into one German volume. Generally, the American edition served as a model for the German one in many ways. For instance, the cover design was only minimally altered, and the coloured and flipped pages were usually carried over unchanged too, only with the English speech bubble text exchanged for German. However, the front cover images of every second Epic issue, the editorial texts at the end of most Epic issues (i.e. the bonus pages), as well as the plot summaries at the beginning, were not adopted in the Carlsen edition.

Flipping

When one turns to the actual comic in either the American or the German first edition, probably the first thing one notices is that is read from left to right, not from right to left as in the original Japanese editions. Not only have the pages been arranged in reverse order, as it were, but also the panels on the pages, in order to produce the Western reading order. In other words, the pages have been mirrored, or flipped, as was customary in manga translations back then.

The problems caused by flipping are well-known (Brienza 2009): on the one hand, all characters appear to be left-handed (see e.g. Kaindl 2004: 200). This problem is evident in *Akira* in scenes such as the one in the 24th Epic issue, in which Dr Dubrovsky (or Dobrovsky – in Japanese, his name is spelled with the katakana syllable ド (do)) is introduced to various colleagues, and in the translations, they all shake hands with their left hand. In the original (p. 16 in the 5th collected volume), they use their right hand here, and in general characters are usually depicted as right-handed. While handedness is never a plot point in *Akira*, the mirroring problem becomes more obtrusive in certain plot elements, such as the 'Numbers' (children with paranormal abilities) having a number tattooed on their right/left palm (see also below),

or Tetsuo having his right/left arm shot off in a laser blast. This reading experience must have been particularly odd for readers who had also seen the (unmirrored) *Akira* animated film which was released around the same time as the manga.

Another problem is created when script in the comic is not translated, but left unchanged, so that it appears in mirror writing after flipping the page. This problem occurs only rarely in *Akira*, for instance on a panel in Epic issue #36 (cf. the original Japanese collected volume 6, p. 347) in which a print on a T-shirt, 'WHEELS OF FIRE', is in mirror writing. The reason for the sparsity of this error is that such inscriptions, of which more is said below in this article, were in most flipped panels carefully re-flipped, or mirrored again – even if it is untranslated Japanese script, of which most American and German readers would probably not realise if it was mirrored or not.

An example of this would be the inscription 魚銀 on a van on p. 78 in the 1st Kōdansha volume (p. 14 in Epic issue #2, p. 80 in the 1st Carlsen volume), which most likely simply says that this van was used to transport fish (魚) before it was stolen and used for other purposes by our protagonist, Kaneda. Therefore, this inscription is not vital to the comprehension of the narrative, and thus no translation is offered. In the Japanese original, the first one of the two kanji characters, 魚, is mostly hidden behind the head of another figure. In the flipped translations, it is the second kanji character (銀) that is concealed, so that the other kanji was re-drawn specifically for these translated editions.

However, the device of flipping was not used indiscriminately, but rather selective. For some pages, it was decided not to flip them, because the horizontal arrangement of the panels was deemed insignificant – e.g. when there is only one panel per horizontal row. In such cases, a problem may occur when there are several speech bubbles on the same panel, which might end up in the wrong order. This problem was largely avoided, because the speech bubbles were re-drawn for the translated edition anyway, so that their placement within the panel could be adjusted accordingly. However, on a panel on p. 55 in the 1st Carlsen volume (Epic issue #1), for instance, the horizontal placement of a speech bubble with a radio message, '*Notruf! Notruf!*' ('Emergency! Emergency!'), and another one with a helicopter pilot's statement

'*Scheint im 17. Bezirk zu sein*' ('Looks like it's in the seventeenth disctrict'), has been left as in the original (p. 53 in the 1st Kōdansha volume) on the right and left, respectively. This means, their reading order is mixed up in the translations: in the Japanese original, the 'emergency' speech bubble on the right would be read first, then the one on the left.

In some instances, flipped and unflipped panels were combined on the same page. For example, on p. 25 in both the 7th Epic issue and the 4th Carlsen volume (cf. p. 30 in the 2nd Kōdansha volume), only the first and the one before the last are not flipped, so that the Arabic numerals on the control buttons of an elevator (46, 45, 44, 43, 6, 5, 4, 3) and Latin letters on a floor inscription ('2-E') on these panels do not appear in mirror writing. The other four panels on this page are, however, flipped as usual.

Colouring

The second severe change in the translated editions to the original edition is the colouring of the originally black and white manga. In this process, all black lines and areas of the original were, as a rule, retained in black, including hatchings and shading screen tones. The white areas, on the other hand, were usually filled with a
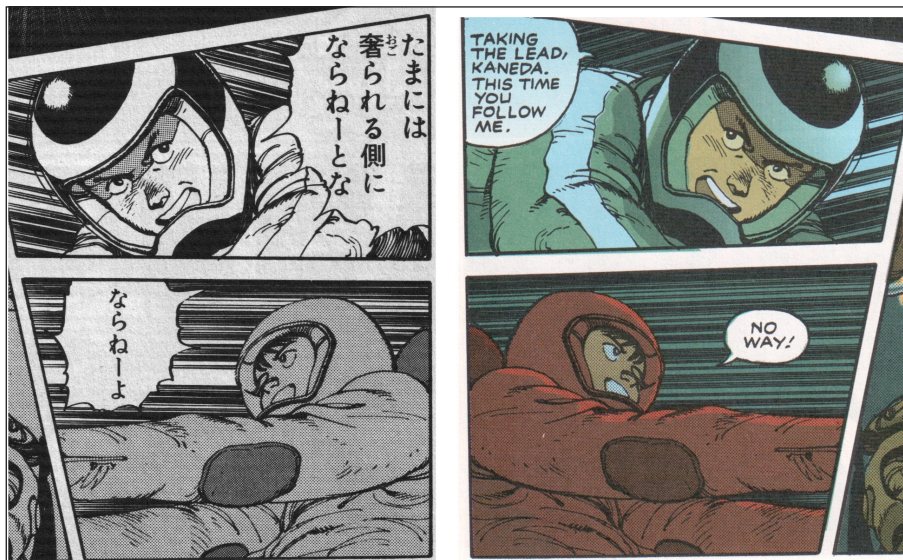

Figure 1: Ōtomo, K. Panels from *Akira* (Kōdansha) #1, p. 22, and *Akira* (Epic) #1.

single colour, albeit the original hatchings and shadings were often interpreted as indicators of modulation of that colour.

Sometimes, however, colours were modulated without such suggestions for this in the original drawing. Such cases are to be regarded as independent contributions of colourist Steve Oliff. For instance, Oliff often placed highlights that are not visible in the original. In the example in **Fig. 1**, in the lower of the two coloured panels, we see strips in a lighter red tone than the other parts of Kaneda's motorcycle jacket and helmet. In the original, though, the jacket and helmet are evenly shaded in grey. Likewise, in the upper panel, the middle strip of the sleeve of Tetsuo's jacket is shown in a different colour than the rest of the sleeve in the translations, whereas in the original, the jacket is uniformly white. Furthermore, for the darker part of Tetsuo's jacket – or more precisely, for the part interpreted as dark by the colourist – two different green tones were used, and the colour of the originally white strip on Tetsuo's helmet is even modulated twice.

Generally, such colour gradients, which had only been made possibly through the new method of computer-aided colouring, were added time and again by colourist Steve Oliff, preferably in the form of concentric rings. An instance of such a circular colour gradient is the coloured panel in **Fig. 2**, in which the background colour changes in six steps from light grey in the middle to dark grey on the edges. Additionally, this gradient effect is combined with a 'lens flare' effect: Oliff placed four bright polygonal and circular shapes over Akira's head, which look like light reflections on a camera lens. In the original, neither of these two effects are visible.

In the colouring of *Akira*, the principle of local colour is prevalent: objects are usually coloured in the colour tone that they would have in real life under normal lighting conditions. Occasionally, however, the colouring deviates from local colour completely, rather following atmospheric aspects instead. This is an option already mentioned before by Klaus Kaindl (my translation):

> The atmospheric connection [between panels] as either continuity or change can also be expressed through certain situative or colouristic depictions. This is sometimes employed in the translation of Japanese comics, which are
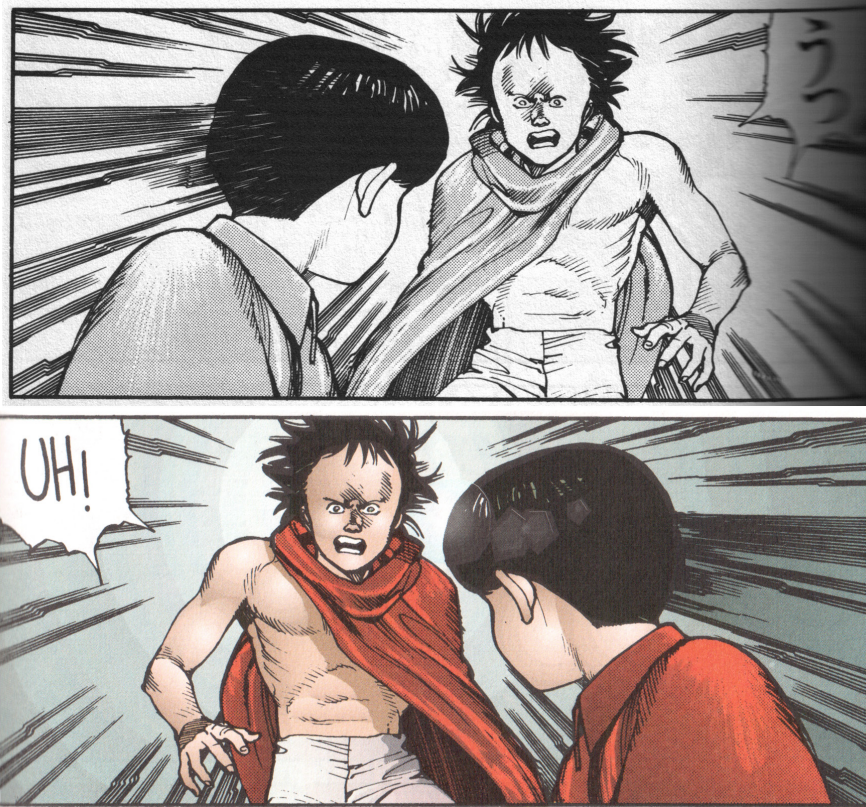
Figure 2: Ōtomo, K. Panels from *Akira* (Kōdansha) #4, p. 119, and *Akira* (Carlsen) #10, p. 7.

originally black and white, but are coloured for the American and European market, which in turn – due to specific symbolic meanings of colours – may lead to changes in the depiction of the narrative. (2004: 204–205).

In a scene in the 22nd Epic issue (p. 82–83 in the 11th Carlsen volume), for instance, two figures fight each other using psionic powers. Each of these characters seems to illuminate himself and the space behind him in a different colour, green and orange, respectively (whereas in the original, on p. 302 in the 4th Kōdansha volume, they are simply rendered in different shades of grey). Through this kind of colouring, certain aspects of the narrative are made easier comprehensible, such as the effects of invisible supernatural forces in this case. Furthermore, the characters become, in a way,

colour-coded: the colouring separates the figures into two parties, so that readers can tell the 'good' (orange) and the 'evil' (green) combatants apart simply by their colours.

Sometimes, however, one cannot help but speak of colouring errors. For instance, in a scene in the Epic issue #26 (p. 91–93 in the 13th Carlsen volume, cf. vol. 5, p. 150–152 in the Japanese 6-volume edition), Kaneda is given a control unit for some kind of robot and is warned not to use 'the red switch'. The control box is shown from all sides, but none of the switches is coloured red.

All things considered, though, the colouring of *Akira* must be regarded as decidedly high quality for that time, especially when we compare the novel computer based colouring of *Akira* to the conventional colouring of other comics published by Marvel at that time, in which colour areas are usually confined in black outlines and evenly filled with one single colour. Multi-stage colour modulations, let alone continuous colour gradients as in *Akira,* are rarely to be found in these comics. Marvel/Epic seem to have been proud of the colouring in *Akira* when they wrote, '*Akira* is the first regular comic book in the world to be coloured using such a system' (Ōtomo 1988–1995: issue #15). Apparently, Oliff was Ōtomo's 'personal choice for colourist on the project', as another editorial text informs us (Ōtomo 1988–1995: issue #1).

Script

Let us now turn to the translation in a narrower sense, i.e. the translation of Japanese script into English and German. In *Akira*, there are three kinds of script: sound effects, speech bubble script, and inscriptions or labels integrated into the drawings, e.g. on signs etc. We will consider sound effects first.

In the Japanese original, sound effects appear in two different forms: on the one hand those that are typeset in regular Japanese machine fonts and placed in speech bubbles which are assigned to the source of the sound, as if the objects making the sound would talk. This peculiar (from a Western point of view) use of the speech bubble has been described before by Klaus Kaindl (my translation):

In this context, the culture-specific differences in the use of the speech bubble should be mentioned. In Japanese, for instance, it is also used for

rendering sounds made by machines and objects, which is unusual in Western comics (cf. fig. 2+3). (2004: 212).

The figures referred to by Kaindl are in fact panels from *Akira*, even though they do not actually contain the sort of sound effect in question.

On the other hand, we find regular sound effects as drawn katakana characters integrated into the panel drawings. These letters are rendered in a multitude of different shapes and tonalities (white, black, or shades of grey). In the manga translation practice of today, sound effects would be more likely left in Japanese script in the drawings, and printed as approximate transcriptions or translations in footnotes or in smaller script next to them. In the Epic edition, however, both kinds of sound effects were transferred into American equivalents and integrated, usually without speech bubbles, into the drawings.

Many different typographic effects and colours were employed for the rendering of these new sound effects. In the first German edition (and, incidentally, also in the second German edition, which was printed in black and white), these American sound effects were taken over unchanged, which meant a reduction of labour and thus costs as opposed to yet another pass of translating and retouching the sound effects. This practice is also reported to have been employed in French manga translations (Howell 2001).

In a survey among German-language comics publishers conducted by Klaus Kaindl in 1997, several publishers mentioned 'international comprehensibility' (my translation) as a reason not to translate sound effects (2004: 175). Although it may be true that German-speaking readers can easily guess the sound implied by the American sound effects, those sounds would of course be rendered with different letter combinations in the German language. Interestingly, on a panel on which there is a hand dropping pills on a table (p. 41 in the 1st Carlsen volume), the sound effect '*KLATTER*' (originally チャラッ, '*chara!*' on p. 39 in the 1st Kōdansha volume), obviously derived from the clattering sound, is spelled with a K instead of a C and thus looks reminiscent of German. (The word '*klatter*' does not exist in the German

language, though; the closest German equivalent of 'clatter' would probably be '*klappern*' or '*klacke(r)n*'.)

In this context, we should also consider the lettering in general. In the original manga, script in regular speech bubbles is varied only through font size and the shape of the speech bubbles themselves. In the translations, however, the background within the speech bubbles is often apparently arbitrarily coloured, e.g. light blue in the first panel on p. 23 in the 1ˢᵗ Carlsen volume (cf. p. 21 in the 1ˢᵗ Kōdansha volume). Occasionally, the letters in the translations are coloured and graphically designed like sound effects in order to add emphasis, as in the second panel on said page, in which the hand-drawn letters 'YEAH!' overlap each other and are coloured in an orange-to-yellow gradient. Altogether, the lettering in the translated editions gives a decidedly different impression than the original one: more diversified and elaborate, but it is also not far-fetched to imagine that this lettering might appear to readers as more unsettled and strenuous to read.

Let us now consider the translation of script in speech bubbles. Caption boxes and thought bubbles are used only rarely in *Akira*, which is why in this article, the term 'speech bubble script' is used for these kinds of script. As mentioned above, this speech bubble text was translated in a two-tiered process from Japanese into American English. According to the imprint, the German translation was made directly from Japanese, but sometimes the German translators appear to have turned to the earlier English translation as well (e.g. in the Carlsen volume 6, p. 75, on which the text of a speech bubble is attributed to a different character than in the Japanese original; the same questionable attribution was made in the Epic issue #12). Using English as a relay language instead of translating directly from Japanese was also employed in other German manga editions (Jüngst 2008) and other foreign-language manga editions, e.g. French (Howell 2001).

One translation decision for which some readers might criticise the Epic edition is the name of the female protagonist, which is given as 'Kay' in English. In the original Japanese, it is usually rendered with the katakana syllables ケ (ke) and イ (i). In German, this name is spelled 'Kei' accordingly. One might thus suspect that the translators of the Epic edition turned a common Japanese given name into an American

one, possibly in order to make the whole setting of the comic appear less alien (see Howell 2001 for more examples of character name substitutions in American manga editions). To be fair, however, it must be said that Kei's/Kay's name never appears in the kanji logographic script, so that it cannot be decided which of the several homophonous Japanese names the phonetic sequence 'kei' refers to, if at all. In fact, there are at least two instances in the original comic in which that name is spelled with the Latin letter K (Kちゃん 'K-chan'), which would then, in English pronunciation, indeed be probably more accurately rendered as 'Kay'.

A difficulty common to the translation of all kinds of Japanese text are the Japanese suffixes after personal names, such as -chan, -kun, -sama, -san, etc. Nowadays in manga translations, these suffixes are often only transliterated (i.e. the Japanese syllables are rendered in Latin characters) instead of translated (Brienza 2009). The two *Akira* translations, however, experimented with various translation solutions. For example, on p. 174 in the 4th Kōdansha volume, Kei/Kay is adressed as ケイ様 (Kei-sama), i.e. with the respect-indicating suffix -sama. In the English translation (Epic issue #20), this form of address is expressed in the phrase 'You, honored lady, are Kay, are you not?' In the German edition (p. 62 in volume 10), it is reflected by putting the whole sentence in plural form, the archaic and equally respect-indicating '*Ihr müßt Kei sein*'. These different forms of translation are, however, not used consistently within the respective translated editions, and sometimes these suffixes are ignored entirely so that information is lost. (A similar example regarding the translation – or lack thereof – of formal speech in a French comic into German is given in Kaindl 2004: 242.)

Still, altogether the English and German translations of the speech bubble script seem thoroughly careful and elaborate. More problematic than the speech bubble translation though, is the translation of that kind of script in *Akira* that is part of the drawings themselves, e.g. street signs, graffiti on house walls, advertisement boards, etc., sometimes called 'inscriptions' or 'labels'. A radical solution to this translation task is the deletion without replacement of this script, so that it does not need to be translated anymore.

This solution was employed in a few instances, even in some that contained Western script in the original Japanese comic already, such as in a panel on p. 99 in the 1st original collected volume, in which the character Masaru has the number 27

in Arabic numerals clearly visibly tattooed on his palm. He is thus marked as one of the 'Numbers', children with supernatural abilities who all have a different number on the palm of their right hand (or the left hand in the flipped translated editions, respectively). This quite important information gets lost in the translations at this point (Epic issue #2/p. 101 in the 1st Carlsen volume), as the number was removed entirely, possibly in order not to have it appear in mirror writing.

Another possibility to deal with this kind of script is to simply leave it in the original language and not offer any translation at all. This is practised in several instances, such as the writing on the house wall shown on p. 39 in the 1st Carlsen volume (Epic issue #1, cf. p. 37 in the 1st Kōdansha volume), which says that ビリヤード (biriyādo) and 卓球 (takkyū) – billiards and table tennis – can be played in this building. The comprehension of these two words is not crucial for the comprehension of the narrative, even more so as their meaning can be easily guessed when considering the adjacent pictorial representations of the corresponding tools of these games – a billiard cue, billiard balls, and table tennis bats. Still, it might have an irritating effect on American and German readers to be confronted, time and again, with script that the majority of them cannot read.

The third variant of dealing with inscriptions and labels is its complete tacit translation. This method is employed in many places, for instance on a panel in the final Epic volume: a banner with 'GREAT AKIRA EMPIRE' written on it is unfolded there. Thus the phrase 'Great Tokyo Empire', which appears frequently in the comic and must be familiar to the reader at this point in the series, seems to have been re-written by replacing the word 'Tokyo' with 'Akira'. In the Japanese original comic (p. 423 in volume 6), however, the well-known phrase 'Great Tokyo Empire' was retained unaltered in the characters 大東京帝國 and merely extended by adding the word 'AKIRA' in Latin letters and an exclamation mark. The difference in meaning between the two wordings might be marginal, but this example makes clear what great liberties the translators sometimes have taken.

The last two label translation methods mentioned here may also be used jointly in an unfortunate combination. In the panels in **Fig. 3** we see the same truck from
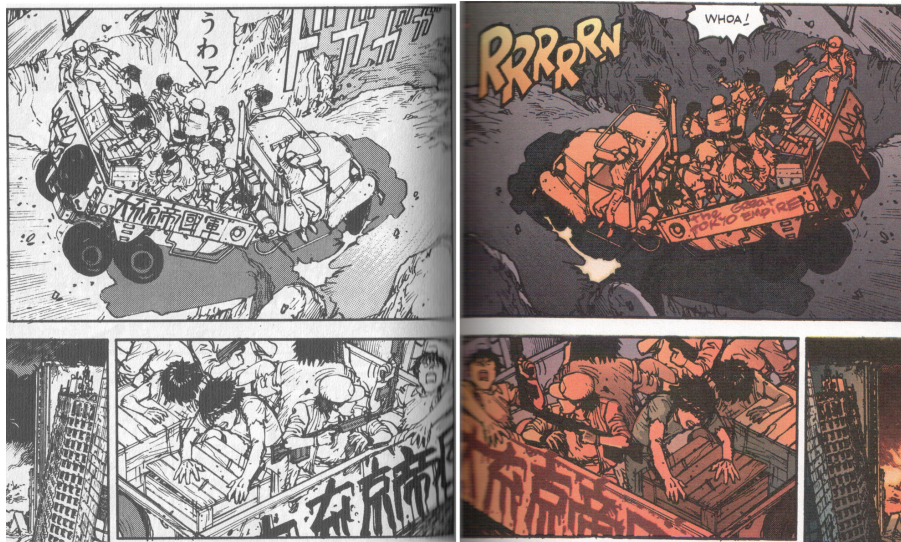
Figure 3: Ōtomo, K. Detail of *Akira* (Kōdansha) #4, p. 333, and a page from *Akira* (Epic) #22.

the same side. The inscription on it is given in one panel as 'the GReat TOKYO EMPIRE' in Latin script. On the other panel, however, it is retained in Japanese characters. This does not affect the comprehension of this label, because this English wording 'great Tokyo empire' is the one used throughout the comic as the translation of this phrase. Yet any immersive effect of the reading experience is disrupted as two different diegetic levels clash in these panels. The script in the bottom panel is diegetic, which we see in the same way as it could be perceived by the characters in the story, whereas the script in the upper panel is extra-diegetic script. This extra-diegetic script is meant for the readers but cannot be perceived by the characters in this form, as it is highly unlikely that the soldiers of the 'Great Tokyo Empire' label their vehicles in English. And even if they would, this would mean that the English writing would have been erased and painted over with Japanese writing within the mere seconds that pass between the two panels. This translation variant is therefore a clumsy one, and an unnecessary one too, as the Japanese phrase for 'Great Tokyo Empire' has already been shown untranslated several times in the translated editions at this point in the series.

Reception

To sum up, the first American and German translated editions of *Akira* can be characterised as translations that have, by means of flipping, colouring and above all the book format, made great efforts to adapt this manga to the habits of the US and German comic markets and those of the readers there. The translation practice back then, which Brienza (2009) characterises as "illogical" and "decidedly self-defeating", differed considerably from today's in which manga are usually published unflipped, in black and white, and in formats similar to those in Japan (Jüngst 2008, Brienza 2009). However, it was not the formal commonalities between translated manga and original American and European comics that seemed to attract the recipients' attention, but rather the purported differences in content.

An example of this kind of reception is an announcement text of the publication of the first two Carlsen volumes in an issue of *Rraah!* from February 1991. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Rraah!* was one of the leading German-language magazines on comics. This short text starts with quotes from the cover blurb (my translation):

> Moebius has called it "the hard rock comic of the 90s". *The New York Times* spoke of a "masterpiece", *Libération* even of a "mega comic". Nice words for a series that, in pseudo-literary guise, pioneers the influential violent tendencies of modern Japanese comics. The comic in question is Katsuhiro Otomo's "Akira", which Carlsen begins to publish this month. (*Rraah!* 1991: 43).

Then the plot is summed up. The brief announcement article ends with the following lines:

> Katsuhiro Otomo (born 1954) is one of the most successful comic creators in his home country. He published his first works already at the age of 19. Between 1980 and 1982, his series "Domu" achieved sales figures of over 500.000 copies and stayed at number one of the Japanese charts for weeks. Volume three of the Carlsen *Akira* edition will already be published in May, after that a new album is going to be published every two months. (*Rraah!* 1991: 44).

This short review shows quite clearly the ambivalence with which Western comics criticism initially reacted towards *Akira*: on the one hand, *Akira* is discounted as the confirmation of the old prejudice against Japanese 'violence comics'. This tendency of the Western press to highlight depictions of violence in manga was already present in the 1970s: according to an article in another German comics magazine from 1978, (my translation), 'Japanese comics are pervaded by a dark, malign nihilism which leads to almost every comic ending in an orgy of violence and death' (Burgdorf 1978: 19). On the other hand, *Rraah!* feels compelled to report on manga as the latest success story on the German comics market. Basically, this point in time is already the beginning of the schism in the German (as well as the whole Western) comics scene into manga fans on one side, and fans of American and European comics on the other – a schism that continues to the present day (Brienza 2009).

At the same time, we must conclude that there was nothing wrong with these two translations in Benjamin's sense: while they adapt the manga to their respective domestic comic markets, they are 'translucent' and make it obvious that they are translations, not originals. The quality of the translation, however, seems to have had little effect on the success of *Akira* in America and Europe, which, while unprecedented for a manga, was still moderate in comparison to the popularity achieved by later manga series (Jüngst 2008). If we follow Brienza's explanation of the development of the American manga market, the Western *Akira* editions were still too much part of the narrow 'comics field' instead of the wider 'book field' to have been able to spearhead a real manga boom in the West.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Editorial Note

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