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To Laugh or to Cry? Ambiguity and Humour in Jason's Graphic Novels*Izvorni znanstveni rad / original research paper**Primljeno / received 15. 7. 2020. Prihvaćeno / accepted 12. 6. 2021.*

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The paper offers a reading of Jason's use of sparsity, seriousness, and reduction as a concealment of a technique that is based on multifaceted ambiguity involving the blending of genres, a playfully intertextual attitude, and surprising emotional depth of character and story. It discusses the connection between humour and visual, textual, and structural ambiguity in Jason's works, as well as ambivalence in the reader's response, illustrates Jason's combination of incongruous genres and simultaneous employment of motifs from children's literature and various genre movies (such as science fiction, crime thrillers, heist movies, and horrors), and explores Jason's technique of subverting expectations of comic relief by withholding certain structural parts of a joke (typically a punchline) or inserting an unexpected element (such as psychological depth).

Keywords: ambiguity, children's literature, humour, intertextuality, Jason

“Under the North sky will be born a man
who will tell strange tales in images and words.
He will be known by one name where he goes
and great confusion will rule the land.”

– *Nostradamus*¹

(Jason, *O Josephine!*, 2019)

John Arne Sæterøy (1965), more widely known under his pen name Jason, is a Norwegian cartoonist, winner of numerous awards (such as the 2002 Harvey Award and the 2007 and 2008 Eisner Awards), whose works feature anthropomorphic animal

¹ The “biographical” note appended to Jason's caricature of himself on the last page of *O Josephine!* (2019).

characters (most frequently birds, dogs, rabbits, and cats) drawn in a stark, usually black-and-white style. When additional colours are used, Jason's works include either a single colour (such as a very saturated yellow in *O Josephine!* or a striking red in *The Iron Wagon* (2003)) or a range of colours (often muted, e.g. in *I Killed Adolf Hitler* (2007) or in *Low Moon* (2009)). The apparent simplicity of the style is regularly reinforced by the use of flat colours, with shading included very rarely (e.g. in *Lost Cat* (2017) and *Athos in America* (2012)). Clear and defined linework is paired with a frequent lack of motion within and between panels, which is sometimes taken to such an extreme that entire pages feature series of static panels (Fig. 1), with framing very rarely straying from a limited range of shots (medium shots and full shots of characters, with occasional flourishes such as closeups, extreme closeups, and a bird's eye view). This visual sparsity is paired with a certain reduction in the content of Jason's stories, primarily in his characters' behaviour. In a manner evoking Buster Keaton, characters commonly exhibit little or no visible emotion, even when engaged in emotionally charged or strenuous activities (physical altercations, arguments, scenes of escape and pursuit, etc.). Their blank, distant stares are often accompanied by very few words or even complete silence, and in fact many of Jason's panels and even entire works are completely devoid of words, the most notable example of this approach being the entirely silent collection *Sshhhh!*, 2003 (first published in 2000).

Jason's stark style and overall lack of motion, emotion, and (sometimes) text contribute to the creation of his signature deadpan humour, but Jason's employment of multi-layered ambiguity of tone complicates any reductive or simplistic readings. For every Keatonesque moment of darkly humorous resignation there is a scene of cartoonishly overexaggerated reaction in the vein of Charlie Chaplin (such as when Jason's characters jump off the ground in surprise or when beads of sweat spring off their heads in moments of anxiety or fear). Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, for every instance of slapstick comedy there is a moment of genuine and moving tragedy. What causes the "great confusion" and makes the humour of Jason's works so deeply ambiguous is the fact that the influences of both Keaton and Chaplin and both the serious and the comic mode are so tightly intertwined that they are occasionally inseparable, with the resulting effect being that of ambiguous reader reaction: are we supposed to laugh or cry, smirk or empathise? Jason's work exhibits an undecidability of tone, a continually shifting and changing relationship between tragedy and comedy, not unlike the "fragile boundary" between horror and humour that Sue Zlosnik and Avril Horner (2013: 122) identify in comic Gothic, recognizing that the two concepts function not as opposites but as a continuum. As this paper aims to show, Jason's use of sparsity and reduction conceals a technique that is based on a multifaceted ambiguity involving a seriocomic tone, a blending of genres, and a playfully intertextual attitude. The paper begins by discussing the connection between humour and visual, textual, and structural ambiguity in Jason's works, as well as ambiguity in the reader's response. The second part is dedicated to Jason's combination of incongruous genres, and primarily deals with Jason's simultaneous employment of tropes from children's literature and various genre movies (such as science fiction, crime thrillers, heist movies, and horrors). The

third part of the paper focuses on Jason’s technique of subverting expectations of comic relief by withholding certain structural parts of a joke (typically a punchline) or inserting an unexpected element (such as psychological depth).

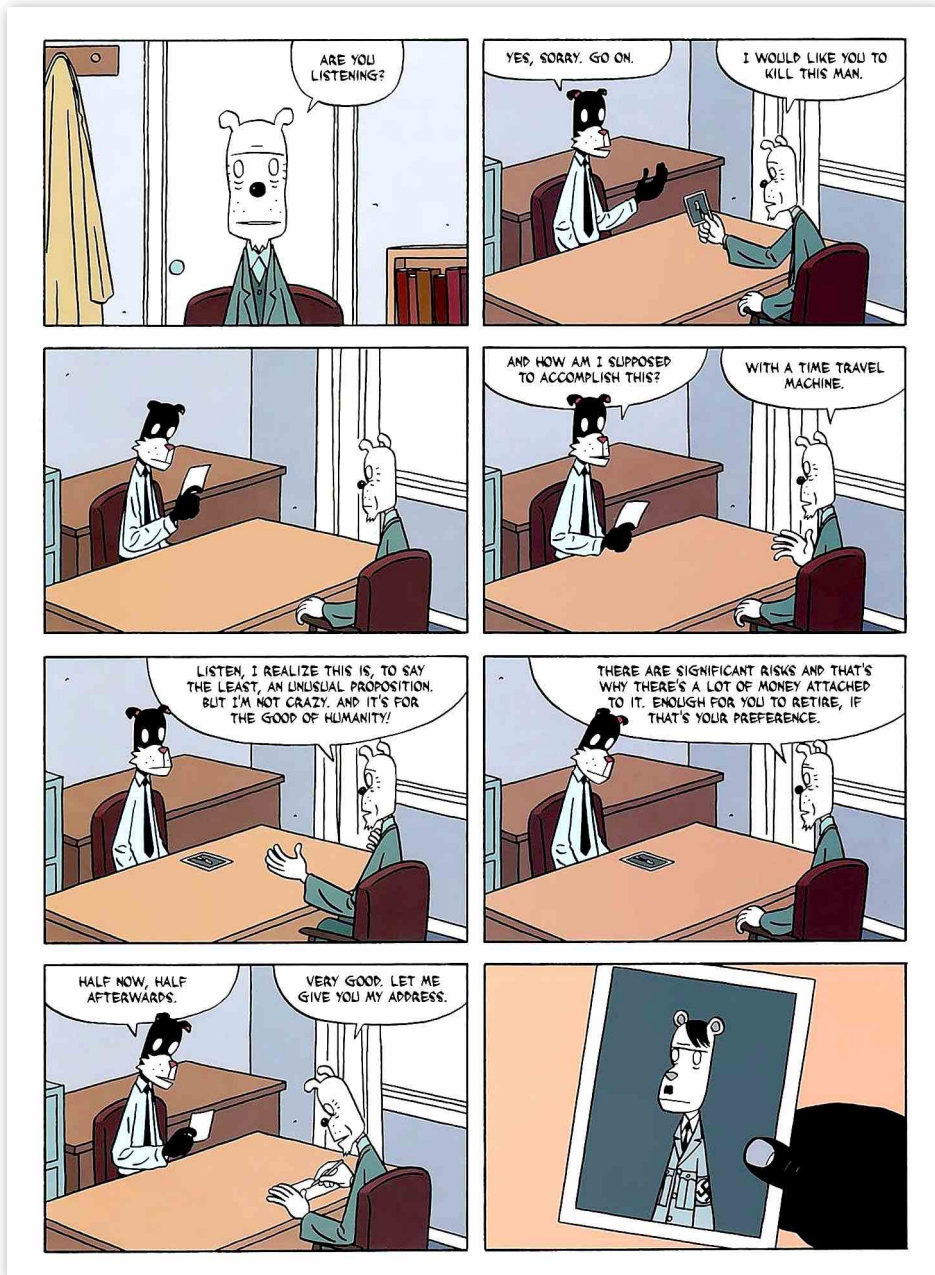


Fig. 1. *I Killed Adolf Hitler* (Jason 2007)
 Sl. 1. *Ubio sam Adolfa Hitlera* (Jason 2007)

What's so funny?

Discussing literary ambiguity broadly, William Empson defines it as “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language” (Empson 1949 [1930]: 1), a situation in which “alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading” (x). In theories that focus more specifically on humour, the springboard of humorous effects is occasionally located in ambiguity. Elliott Oring goes so far as to define humour itself as structured ambiguity (Oring 1992), while McGraw and Warren's view of humour as benign violation rests on the confusion between the threatening and the benign: “The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that anything that is threatening to one's sense of how the world ‘ought to be’ will be humorous, as long as the threatening situation also seems benign” (McGraw and Warren 2010: 1142). Much of the humour in Jason's work relies on structured ambiguities which invite clashing “alternative views” by providing enough incentive to interpret everything from individual panels to smaller scenes to entire books as simultaneously tragic and comic. At the visual level, a reader of Jason's works encounters ambiguity at first contact with the adventures of the aforementioned anthropomorphic² characters, whose hybridisation of the human and the animal³ establishes an immediate source of confusion. This ambiguity is not merely generated by the clash between the apparently animal characters and their very human endeavours and problems, but also between other, primarily comical, sources featuring similar anthropomorphisation (such as Mickey Mouse cartoons and comic books, as well as their parodic reworkings, especially Massimo Mattioli's *Squeak the Mouse*) and Jason's own creatures, whose lives are far more complex interactions between comedy and tragedy.⁴

At the textual level, there are numerous cases which can be aligned with Stephen Ullmann's three types of ambiguity, namely phonetic, grammatical, and lexical (Ullmann 1964: 156), most commonly in Jason's puns. Some of them rely on (near-)homonymy, as in the story “Waiting for Bardot” (Jason 2015), a short comical spoof of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which two clueless male characters wait for a woman, presumably

² In Eco's discussion of comic effect, which he claims is realised when we observe the comic hero violating a rule, it is pointed out that the hero is perceived as “less human than ourselves”: “It is for this reason that the animalization of the comic hero is so important. The tragic hero cannot be an animal (at most it can be an anthropomorphized animal: Walt Disney's Bambi). We even shed tears for Snow White poisoned by the apple; we do not cry for the seven dwarves who weep for their Princess — on the contrary, we feel relieved from our own sorrow concerning Snow White's fate precisely because of the laughable pain of the dwarves. Our tension for the tragedy is mitigated by the ridiculization of the majesty of sorrow through the ridiculization of the zoomorphic little men. They are the mask through which we can pass over in laughter the difficulty of living” (Eco 1984: 2).

³ In this context, it should be noted that the surrealism and absurdism of Jason's worlds evoke comparisons with predecessors who also employed anthropomorphisation, such as comic book authors George Herriman and Moebius.

⁴ On animal representation in graphic narratives, including anthropomorphisation in Jason, see Alaniz (2020).

Brigitte Bardot.⁵ Other instances of confusion-based humour rely on visual-verbal gags and tacit knowledge, whether linguistic, literary, musical, or otherwise (Aarons 2017), for example in “Moondance” (Jason 2015) (a series of Van Morrison⁶ song titles reimagined as horror comic book covers) or “Karma Chameleon” (ibid.) (whose title is taken from the 1983 Culture Club hit pop song and involves a comedic reworking of classic giant monster movies by featuring an enormous and very literal chameleon). Examples of structural ambiguity may be more involved and rely on incongruity, such as “New Face” (ibid.), a protracted joke played on the reader’s interaction with the format of a graphic novel. The story about a falsely accused man who escapes the authorities by having his face surgically altered employs incongruity between the verbal and the visual, with the text describing the story presented in the panels slowly beginning to diverge from the action actually depicted in the panels half-way through the story. What occurs by the end of “New Face” is an almost total disjunction between word and image, an effect Charles Hatfield terms “tension, in which various ways of reading – various interpretive options and potentialities – must be played against each other” (2005: 36). Jason’s contrasting of form and content involves a tension which is established between the exaggerated drama of the story being told in words and the simple, quiet moments shared by the two characters shown in the panels: in other words, Jason’s story literally receives a “new face”, emphasising the distinction and ironic contrast between word and image, and playing them against each other in a way that complicates both. Although the story’s final visual-verbal punchline seems embodied in the clash between the unbearable tension of the story’s crescendo and the peaceful image of a sleeping dog (Fig. 2), there is an additional unspoken incongruity between which of the two layers (that of the words or that of the images) represents the “real” story: are we seeing or reading the “new face”? Or, conversely, are both levels somehow equally true? Such ambiguity invites the reader to attempt to decode the truth or falsity of both “word-story” and “image-story” (as well as the exact moment when the two begin to diverge) within the terms of each other. This results in a third narrative, the one assembled by the reader from the suggestive connections between words and images, therefore embodying what Julia Round terms an “*aesthetics of excess* where conflicting information or imperatives structure the text”, an excess “which creates and validates a multiplicity of perspectives, where multiple worlds or interpretations can co-exist” (2014: 57). As Hatfield posits with regard to a related effect of word/image contrast achieved in Chris Ware’s “I Guess” (1991), “the interplay of the two suggests a third, more comprehensive meaning that the reader must construct through inference” (Hatfield 2005: 37), thus foregrounding not only the unresolved tension between the two contrasting stories, but also the tension between the reader’s expectations regarding the conventions of the verbal/visual connection in the comic book form and Jason’s destabilisation of those conventions.

⁵ French actress and singer (1934). As Jason pointed out in one interview, the two men in the story “talk about women, but clearly have no idea what they are talking about. It’s nothing they have any real knowledge about, it’s a mystery, like *Godot*” (Lorah 2015).

⁶ George Ivan “Van” Morrison (1945), Northern Irish singer-songwriter.

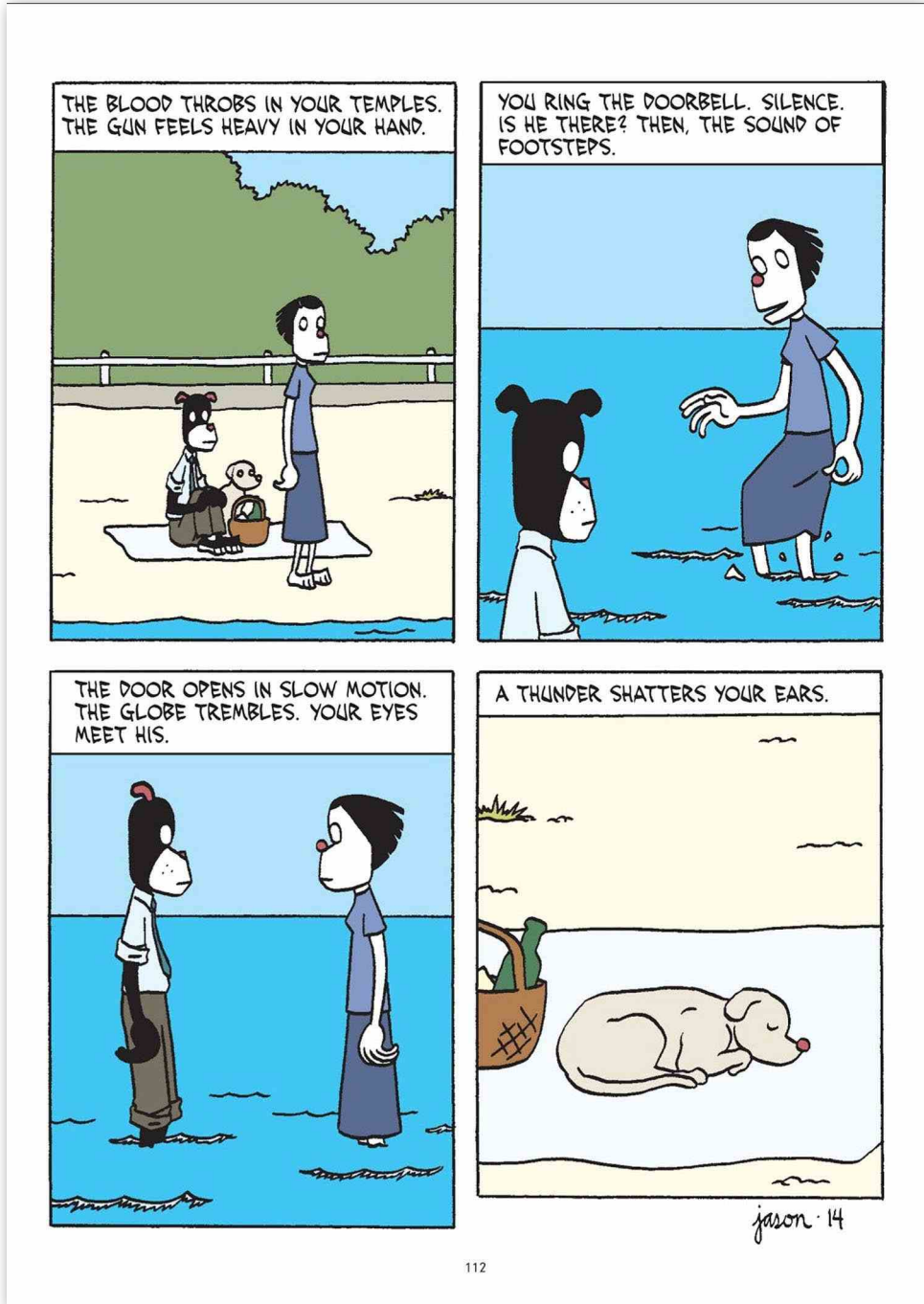


Fig. 2. "New Face" (Jason 2015)
Sl. 2. „Novo lice“ (Jason 2015)

The overarching ambiguity that persists across most of Jason's works is the tension between the reader's various conflicting responses to the events depicted in his stories, the central question being whether the reader is supposed to laugh or empathise (or perhaps do both at the same time). Brian Cremins expresses this ambiguity of response in his description of one of Jason's short pieces from the collection *Jason Conquers America* (2011). The story introduces an animal character drinking alcohol while fishing in a rowboat. The protagonist soon falls into the water and seems to be sinking, but then somehow finds himself back on the surface, gasping for breath (Fig. 3). Together with the protagonist, we discover that his rowboat is now occupied by what appears to be Jason's version of death: a character resembling Mickey Mouse with a skull-like face holding a scythe (27–28). As Cremins points out, it is unclear what has happened (Cremins 2017: 151):

Has our hero died because of his own carelessness? Or is Death now on holiday, waiting for the dog (or rabbit) to meet him? [...] His laconic creatures look like extras from a classic Disney cartoon, but their silence is unnerving. I laugh at the joke in the comic's final panel, but I am left with a sense of uncertainty.

This sense of uncertainty is inscribed into most of Jason's works. Their prevailing tone or mood is sombre, which is established and reinforced by countless wordless panels featuring characters who are seemingly staring blankly at nothing, sometimes not even moving from one panel to another, as if a total void of activity and speech were being depicted. Importantly, such moments of mute stillness invite the reader to interpret their significance or, to borrow Silvia Adler's term, to read the "values" of silence, "to gain understanding through observation and deduction, and to decode the narrator's (or the protagonist's) intentions, to let symbols and icons 'talk', to deliver information on the implicit level" (2011: 2278–2279). The reader is encouraged to examine silence "not only as a simple absence of speech [...] but also as a vehicle of a large variety of emotions and mental states connected to the protagonists" (2278). Silence thus ultimately functions as (2279):

an invitation for the reader/observer to construct meaning within a sequence based on premises (of a textual or a visual kind). Not only is the reader/observer given the opportunity to fill in the details that are missing between the frames, but s/he also responds with an intense emotional, intellectual and/or critical reaction to what is not articulated explicitly and therefore restored through his/her own understandings.

Part of this interpretive work includes the reading of Jason's frequent employment of humour, usually in the forms of incongruity, irony, parody, puns, intertextuality, and metacommentary on genre tropes. Jason's humour is regularly more subdued, and often inscribed into the cryptic silences that simultaneously contribute to the sombre tone of his work, requiring the reader to identify what Eleanore Forbes Lambert refers to as "silent laughter" in her analysis of humour in the poetry of Emily Dickinson: "Silent laughter simply refers to humor that is embedded in the structural and stylistic ambiguities" (Lambert 2013: 22). By subtly mixing the seriously quotidian with the zany surreal, gravity with levity, Jason's panels simultaneously invite both mirth and empathy, ultimately achieving a darkly humorous tone. This liminality is, according to

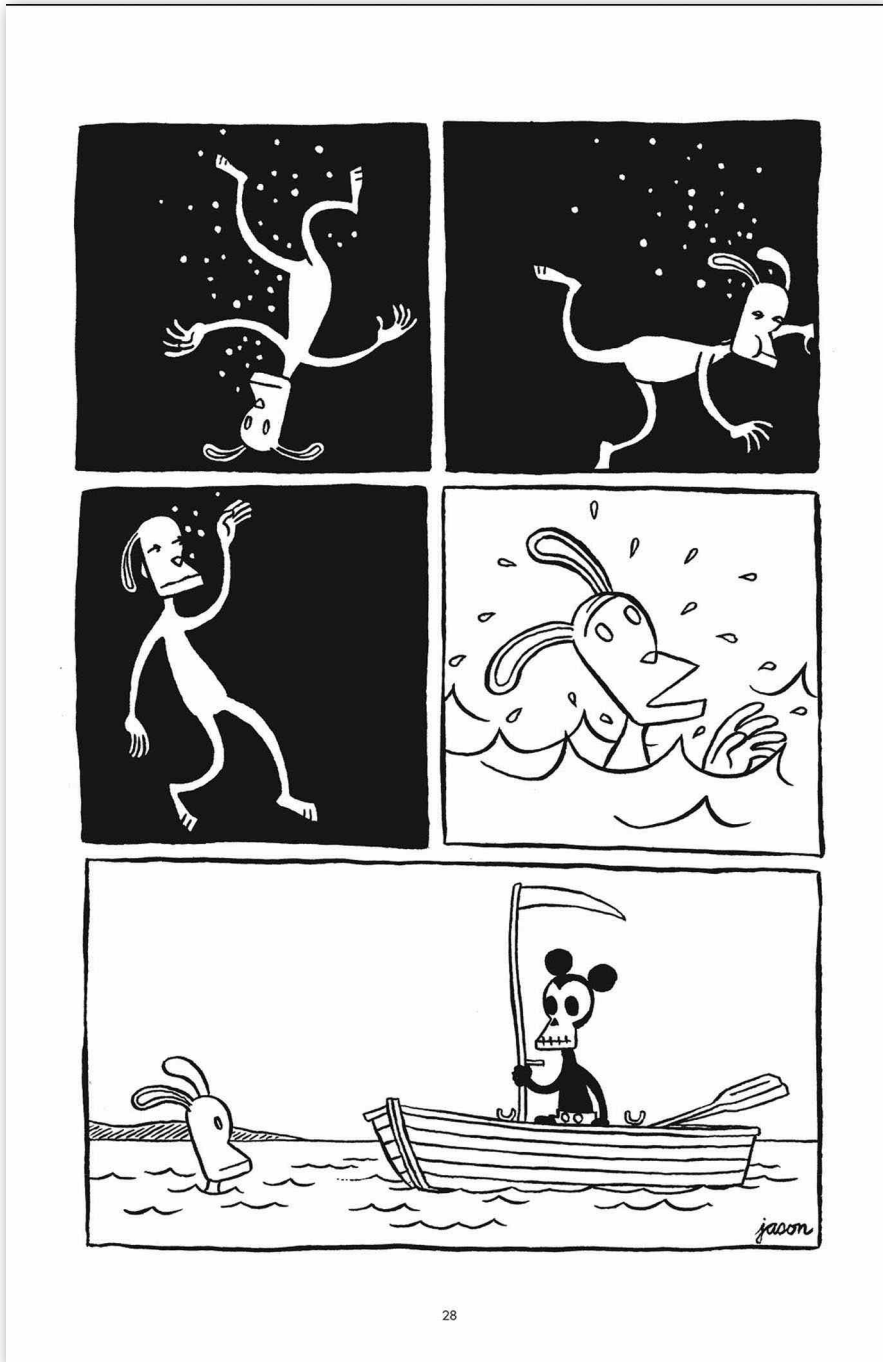


Fig. 3. Jason Conquers America (Jason 2011)

Sl. 3. Jason osvaja Ameriku (Jason 2011)

Umberto Eco, inherent to humour, which is to be found “halfway between tragedy and comedy” (Eco 1984: 7). Jason’s stories are positioned on this uncertain border between the two opposites, which in his panels continually probe each other and bleed over into each other’s domains, thus complicating this very duality by never entirely taking tragedy or comedy as its main tonality, or, alternatively, by being both tragic and comic at the same time. This Derridean “undecidability” of tone consistently draws our attention back to the text itself, the text which, as Gayatri Spivak points out in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, is “coming undone as a structure of concealment, revealing its self-transgression, its undecidability” (Derrida 1997 [1967], lxxv). Like a spectre that is neither present nor absent, or both present and absent at the same time (Derrida 2006 [1993]), humour is never far from Jason’s tragic characters, and, vice versa, the spectre of tragedy seems always to be haunting even the most slapstick of Jason’s scenes.

Genre games

This complex relationship between the comic and the tragic in Jason’s stories involves multiple ambiguities that, in part, arise from a playful attitude towards genre. Firstly, it is necessary to address the most prominent genre-related source of ambiguity and ambivalence in Jason’s works: their interaction with and reliance on signifiers of children’s literature and filmic sources targeting child viewers. The visual identity of Jason’s graphic novels depends heavily not just on children’s books and cartoons and the way children interact with such media, but even on children’s experience of drawing. As mentioned above, most of Jason’s characters are anthropomorphic and drawn in a very simple style, therefore immediately establishing ties with children’s picturebooks, as they sometimes feature animal characters represented in a cartoonish style. Furthermore, the silence of Jason’s stories reinforces their connection with the purely visual storytelling of those forms of children’s literature that do not employ words, thus focusing the child reader’s attention on the graphical component. This link extends to cartoons that contain no speech, for instance very early Mickey Mouse cartoons featuring silent characters (e.g. *Plane Crazy* (1928)), where Mickey was drawn as a predominantly black character with large white eyes and a white mouth, which is a style shared (although in a distinctly modified form) by many of Jason’s characters, especially in *Sshhhh!* Finally, Jason’s approach to drawing his characters’ faces with only very few lines and hollow circles for eyes means that many of his characters from different books become almost interchangeable, and occasionally it is difficult to tell them apart, sometimes even within the same panel (with only hairstyles or facial hair to help distinguish one character from another). Although Jason’s birds have beaks, while dogs and cats have small black noses and droopy or pointy ears, most of the animals are drawn using a set pattern of lines and therefore share a very similar facial structure. This repeatability or iterability of Jason’s characters is evocative of how some children learn to draw by imitating or being taught a pattern of lines and shapes which, once completed, results in an easily repeatable dog or cat, or whatever other commonly drawn character.

However, despite establishing several strong ties with children's literature and cartoons, Jason's technique involves a simultaneous complication of such connections. His art style may create an expectation of simple characterisation and humorous situations involving slapstick, and while Jason's stories certainly do contain such elements, they also subvert them in a variety of ways. On the one hand, this is achieved at the visual level: even when we observe Jason's anthropomorphic characters engaged in scenes of slapstick comedy, their hollow eyes and mysterious silences remind us of the dark undercurrents of Jason's stories, primarily the themes of death, transience, and loss. While such subjects are rarely broached directly in comic books and cartoons with which Jason's stories establish superficial links, in Jason's books they become of central importance. In Mickey Mouse movies and comic books, for instance, falling from a great height might result in a character bouncing back like a spring without sustaining any serious injuries; conversely, in Jason's graphic novel *Hey, wait...* (2001) the protagonist's entire life is ruined because he cannot shake off the guilt that he feels over the death of his childhood friend, who died when attempting to jump over a ravine on the insistence of the protagonist. In certain other of Jason's stories, the notion of death is contemplated with humorous undertones, for example in the second chapter of *Sshhhh!*, where death itself appears as a skeleton that starts to follow the protagonist. Although he is at first unnerved by this apparition, the protagonist gradually grows accustomed to its presence and they begin to spend time together playing cards and watching movies, even going so far as to sleep in the same bed. This comical depiction of the notion of our death always hovering over our shoulder takes an unusual turn when the protagonist manages to avoid being killed by a passing car. Upon witnessing this unexpected escape from demise, his skeletal companion sinks into an existential crisis (Fig. 4).

Despite such seriocomic representations of death, we are constantly reminded that in Jason's works misfortune can strike at any time, and death is entirely senseless, without reason or logic, a sign of chaos that dominates the life of Jason's characters. For instance, in the first chapter of *Sshhhh!* death is depicted as a wizened, black-eyed bird that stalks the protagonist until it one day decides to visit the protagonist's girlfriend, its mere appearance sending her into a deep coma. Seasons pass as the protagonist sits by her hospital bed, fantasising about rescuing her from a cell in a tower overlooked by sinister guards. When she finally does awaken, the two embrace and leave the hospital, but the black-eyed bird⁷ soon kills the girlfriend in the street outside by running her over with its car. Defeated, the protagonist returns to the bridge over a stream where he and his girlfriend first met, but this time he stands there entirely alone as dry leaves flutter down from the barren branches of the surrounding trees. Such subtle yet moving scenes are frequent in Jason's works and serve to remind the reader of a central ambiguity: although Jason's characters appear as though they may have been transplanted from cartoons, their world is strongly defined by the more disturbing aspects of our own, such as senseless tragedy, traumatic loss, and debilitating grief.

⁷ The same character, only multiplied, appears in "Nothing" (Jason 2015) as a representation of Alzheimer's disease.

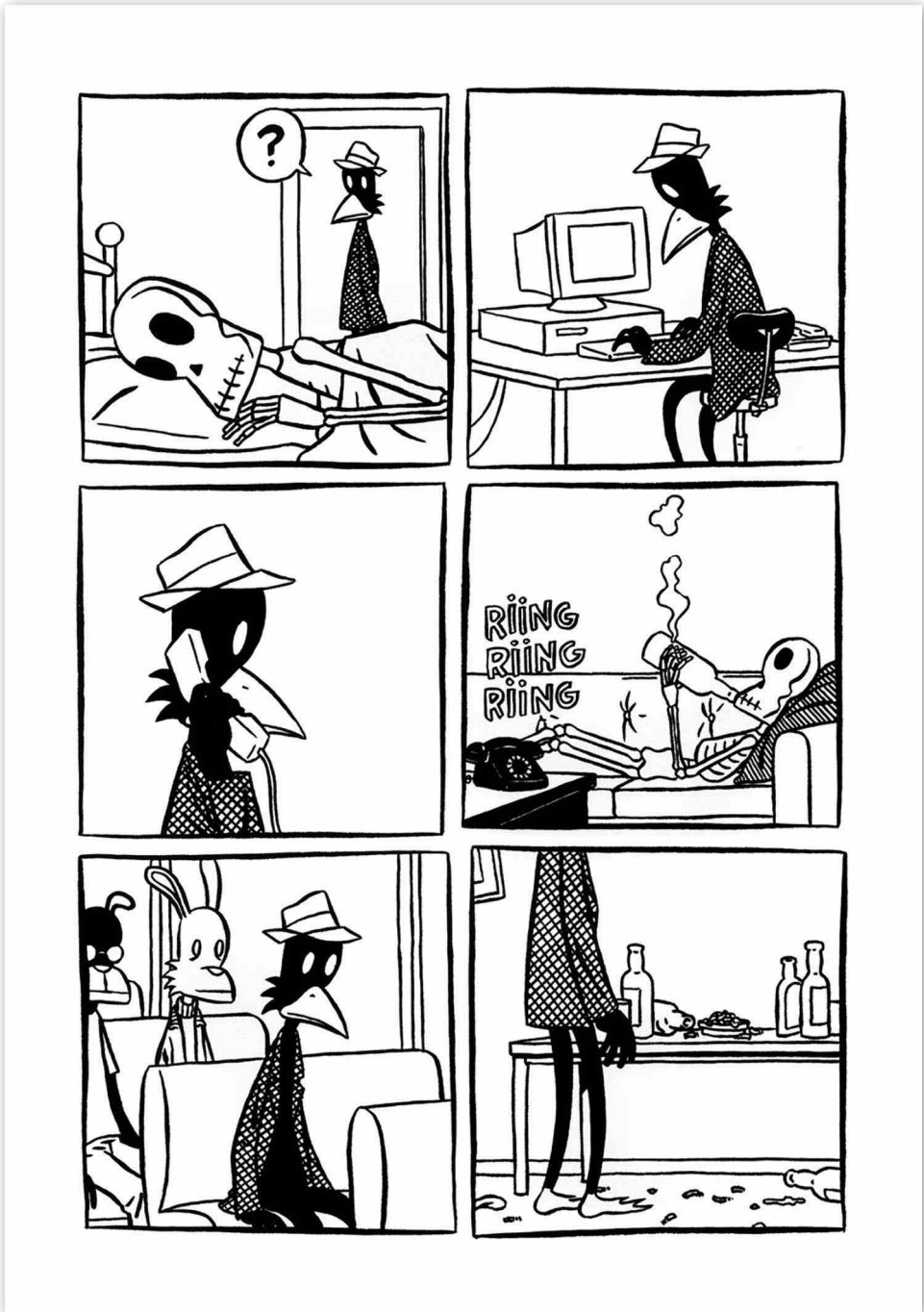


Fig. 4. Sshhhh! (Jason 2003)
Sl. 4. Pssst! (Jason 2003)

To return to the question of Jason's use of other literary genres, it is important to emphasise that his works create ambiguity by making use of not only signifiers of children's literature but also of various other genres, with several different types often represented within a single story (for example, historical romance, family drama, superhero movies, horror, and science fiction). Furthermore, Jason creates combinations, or genre "mash-ups", which bring into contact different characters based on playfully skewed biographies of historical figures, sometimes taken from different time periods. One notable example of this approach is "O Josephine!"; a story in a book with an identical title (Jason 2019: 123–174). In its depiction of a long-standing feud between unlikely lovers, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) and Josephine, whose character is based on the famous dancer and singer Josephine Baker (1906–1975) (and not, as the reader may expect, the first wife of Napoleon, Empress Joséphine of France (1763–1814)), "O Josephine!" combines fictional biography with alternative history and movies about daring heists (such as *Entrapment* (1999), alluded to in the story). Heist movies are among Jason's several recurring intertexts, with Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) evoked through the non-linear narrative structure of stories such as "The Diamonds" (Jason 2019), "If You Steal" (Jason 2015), and *The Left Bank Gang* (Jason 2006), the latter featuring Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce as émigré cartoonists living in Paris who become involved in a bank robbery.

As mentioned above, the deadpan humour of Buster Keaton is often combined with scenes of slapstick inspired by the movies of Charlie Chaplin, but Jason creates unexpected fusions by bringing those two filmic influences into close contact with other incongruent sources. One prominent example of this is found in Jason's *The Living and the Dead* (2006), where the trappings of silent comedy movies (including title cards, used in lieu of spoken words) meet a combination of a romance plot and George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Comical ambiguity is often achieved by such clashes between the old and the new, for instance by transplanting a character from an older period of history into the modern world. *The Last Musketeer* (Jason 2008) tells the story of Athos, a musketeer from Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844) who lives in present-day France. More than 400 years have passed since Athos' great adventure, and he finds that there is little place for an impoverished musketeer in today's world. However, when laser beams from Mars suddenly strike Earth and cause havoc, Athos finds himself involved in a story that combines elements of Dumas' famous novel with such science fiction movie classics like *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and *Flash* (1980).

By blending aspects of entirely different genres, Jason allows them to metatextually interrogate their own and each other's tropes in humorous ways. For instance, the classic cliché of an evil villain surrounded by soldiers who guard the hallways of his den is referred to when the evil Martian leader asks his guard "Isn't it a pain in the ass standing around all day long?" (Jason 2008: 21). Such playful rearrangements of clichés involve a subversion of the source genres (e.g. when the rebellious princess in *The Last Musketeer*, the evil leader's daughter, rejects the "damsel in distress" role by proving to



Fig. 5. *The Last Musketeer* (2008)
Sl. 5. *Posljednji mušketir* (2008)

be far more proactive and effective than the male characters), but Jason's inversions also manage to go beyond comedy and slapstick in scenes of unexpected poignancy. When Athos confronts and defeats a robot visually inspired by the one from *Forbidden Planet*, he ponders its life of following orders "without ever making choices, or deciding your destiny" (25). Athos' "conversation" with the "automaton", as he refers to it, seems to have a purely comedic effect that relies on Athos' confusion of the human and the mechanical. However, after the robot ceases to function due to the damage it sustained, this ambiguity receives an unexpectedly moving dimension when Athos attempts to bury the robot as if it were a human being. When a guard interrupts his efforts, Athos protests: "I was going to give him a decent burial. What manner of barbarians are you?" The poignancy of the moment is intertwined with the comedy of Athos' stilted manner of speaking, but it is not entirely lost. In fact, the scene is mirrored at the end of the story, when Athos himself lies dying in the arms of the princess, his simple final speech inflected both by humour and genuine pathos (Fig. 5). As in so many of Jason's works, in *The Last Musketeer* the ambiguity of genre accomplished by combining radically different components gains in complexity through the merging of the humorous with the serious. The result is once again an undecidability of tone, a reading experience caught "halfway between tragedy and comedy" (Eco 1984: 7).

Comic relief (?)

A number of Jason's stories employ both his signature art style and genre blending, but without making use of the rest of the above-mentioned markers of comicality, such as slapstick or exaggerated gestures, effectively withdrawing any sort of comic relief. In such stories, some level of ambiguity between the serious and the comic is only maintained visually, but is withheld at the level of story or characterisation. For instance, in "Emily Says Hello" (Jason 2009), a woman is repeatedly visited by a hitman who brings her proof that he has eliminated a man of her choosing after addressing the victim by uttering the phrase from the story's title (Fig. 6). Following each killing, five in total, the woman pins a photograph of the latest victim to a wall in her apartment (painted entirely black) and then crosses it out after which it is shown or implied that she provides the hitman with some sort of sexual payment (with the level of sexual intimacy escalating from exposure to masturbation to oral sex). Although the hitman attempts to involve the woman in a relationship, insisting that the killings stop and the two of them run away together, the woman persists in her plan. After the last murder is committed and the police trace the hitman to her location, she jumps from a window in her apartment without answering the hitman's final question: "Who is Emily?" With most of the narrative structure stripped away and only the minimal elements of story and characterisation remaining, the reader is left to fill in the numerous blanks, including the answer to the final question and the woman's motivation for the killings. Furthermore, since there is absolutely no comic relief provided throughout the story, the tension created by ambiguity is never lessened, but instead increases toward and beyond the very end of the story by the fact that the reader is never clearly shown what



Fig. 6. "Emily Says Hello" (Jason 2009)
Sl. 6. „Pozdravlja te Emily“ (Jason 2009)

happens to the woman after her leap from the window. Instead, we observe her falling through entirely black space, with the final panel showing a closeup of her face, her eyes wide open. Whether she is still falling in that panel or has already struck the pavement is another question whose answer remains a mystery, another point of puzzling ambiguity.

While "Emily Says Hello" serves to illustrate Jason's technique of entirely withdrawing comic relief, for the purposes of this paper, however, we will focus on those of Jason's stories that establish ambiguity by containing signs of comicality while also subverting such signs through the withdrawal of tension-relieving humour. For example, stories such as "Proto Film Noir" (Jason 2009) engage in humorous genre-bending and function as a protracted joke with a defined punchline and several markers typical of children's literature. The story in question features characters who look like caricature cavemen dressed in the shaggy furs of animals (with the protagonist even carrying a club, a tool typically used by cartoon cavemen), therefore relying on the reader's knowledge of such sources as the American animated sitcoms *The Flintstones* (first aired 1960) and *Captain Caveman and the Teen Angels* (first aired 1977). Although the initial impression is that the story is set in a desert in prehistoric times, it soon becomes obvious that the setting is in fact modern. This is also the first (ambiguity-based) joke of the story, with the protagonist literally walking into the implied prehistoric setting of one panel and then leaving that panel to stumble across a paved road of modern time, thus subverting the initially implied time/space context.

The joke of merging entirely different time periods (with cavemen living in modern houses, working in gardens, and eating breakfast at dinner tables) is exaggerated further by combining the story of cartoon cavemen with the framework of a classic noir crime story. The "proto" from the title thus functions as a humorous comment on the basic structure borrowed from the genre of noir movies and novels which becomes parodically exaggerated: the protagonist sleeps with a married woman immediately after coming across her house, convinces her that her husband must be murdered, and then proceeds to do so. However, when the husband refuses to stay dead and returns the following day at breakfast, cheerily commenting on the weather, the protagonist decides to repeat the murder. This does not help, the murdered man returns again, and it soon becomes clear that the elements of noir are not functioning as expected. In a parody of a Freudian return of the repressed, the husband keeps reviving just in time for breakfast, which prompts the protagonist to repeat the murder altogether six times using different weapons, including an attempt to dismember the corpse and consume it with the help of the wife (the gruesomeness of this act completely clashing with the bright colours of the suburban setting). Importantly, the returns of the murdered husband are visually mimicked by Jason's repetition of almost identical panels (e.g., the protagonist and the wife sitting together at breakfast; the murdered husband returning to stand at his window and exclaiming "Excellent! What a beautiful day. I think I'll do some gardening"), while most of the variations happen in the panels depicting the various attempts to kill the husband and conceal or discard his remains. Therefore, the tension between the attempts to finalise the murder and the frustration of the couple's

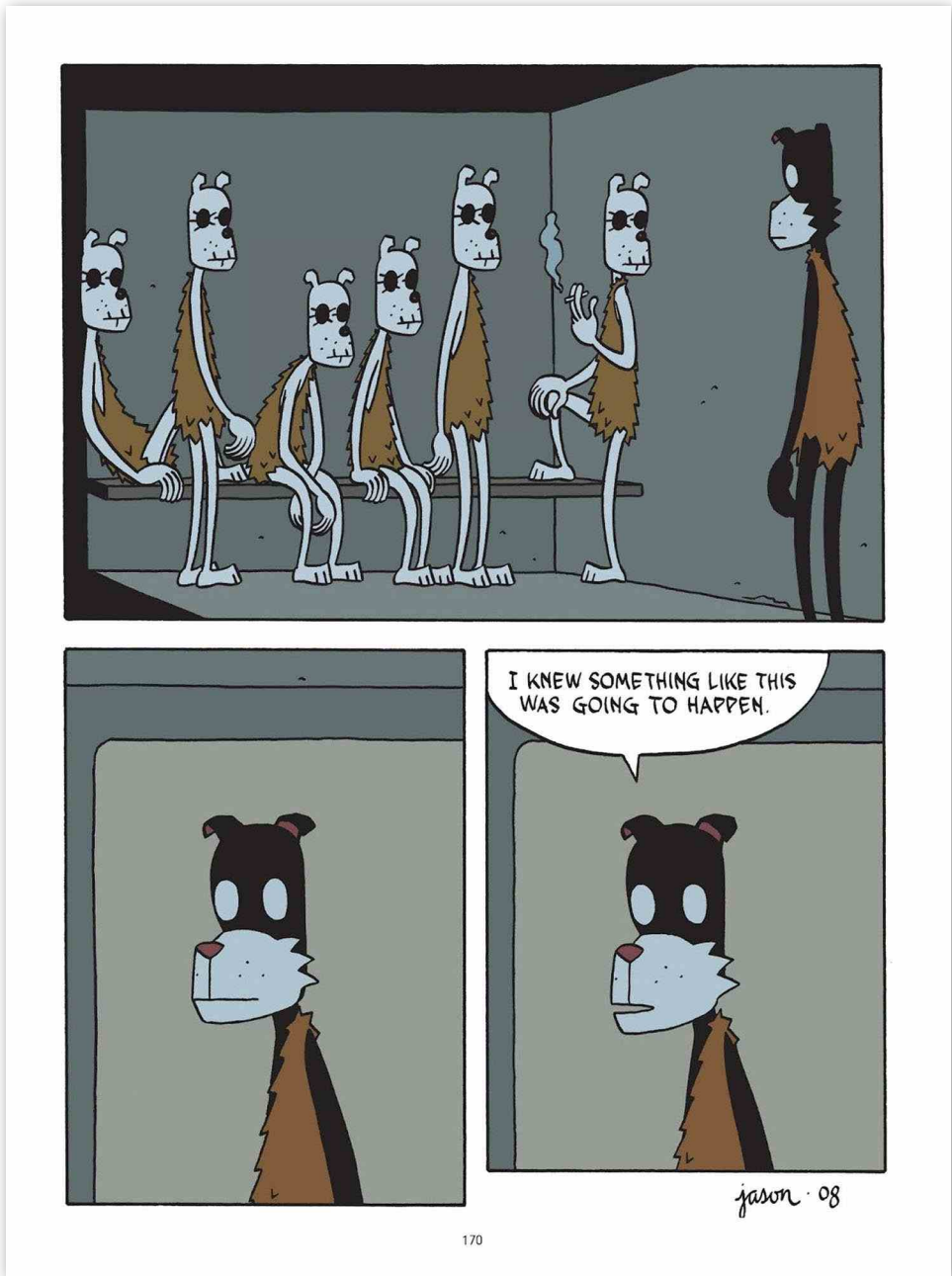


Fig. 7. "Proto Film Noir" (Jason 2009)

Sl. 7. „Proto-film noir“ (Jason 2009)

expectations become reflected in the tension between what Hatfield terms “single image and image-in-series” (2005: 41). In fact, having established how the scenario of the husband's return plays out (return, murder, concealment of remains), at a certain point in the story Jason begins to condense the scenario by eliding some of the panels in the expected sequence (particularly on page 167, where two murders are shown in only four panels), therefore creating added tension that arises from temporal ambiguity: as time condenses, we realise that far more than just six attempts may have taken place, potentially taking the story even further into absurdism and hence increasing the tension between the “image-in-series” (murder, concealment) and “single image” (return of the husband).

Whereas the recurrence of scene structure and panel layout in “Emily Says Hello” does not have a humorous effect, instead heightening the mystery of the story, the repetitions of the husband's murder with creative variations serve as the very basis for the humour of “Proto Film Noir”, underlining its foundation in canned jokes based on repetition. When one of the attempts at murder finally appears to have worked and the husband fails to reappear the following day, the couple's celebration is short-lived: as if suddenly assuming the genre-dictated role of the *femme fatale*, the wife hits the protagonist over the head and the cavemen police quickly haul him off to a prison cell where he is confronted with six living corpses of the man he murdered (Fig. 7). While all the pages preceding this moment use a layout of four vertical panels, with two above and two below, the scene in the cell is shown in a page-wide horizontal panel. The interruption of the four-panel regularity coincides with the escape from the claustrophobic repetition of the murder scenario, but the moment proves deeply ironic: it is an escape not into freedom but into further imprisonment. Therefore, although “Proto Film Noir” includes many of the standard elements of a noir story, they seem to have been deconstructed and then reconstructed in a way that draws attention not only to the genre but also the framework of a protracted joke. The joke itself culminates with the protagonist locked away with his undead victims in a sort of parody of Dantean punishment, ready to deliver the final punchline as he stares from the last panel with his deadpan expression: “I knew something like this was going to happen” (Jason 2009: 170).

It must be stressed that in a story such as “Proto Film Noir”, Jason's characters' deadpan expressions contribute to the comedic effect, since their blank stares, when confronted with preposterous circumstances, only increase the darkly humorous tone of the story. However, this method changes in stories that undercut their humour by withholding certain expected elements of a joke, such as a punchline, or complicate its reading by adding other, unexpected elements, usually psychological depth. In such cases, the deadpan expressions may not actually read as humorous, but as hurt, anguished, heartbroken, lost, or whatever other non-humorous emotion the reader maps onto the characters' apparently empty expressions in their attempt to reconstruct meaning as a response to an ellipsis of text. The full impact of Jason's approach emerges from the juxtaposition of such stories as “Proto Film Noir” and “&” (both

of which appear in *Low Moon*), the latter having much in common with the former, both in terms of filmic influences and repetition-based humour but differing in the way it simultaneously employs and subverts the framework of a protracted joke. “&” follows two parallel stories, each of which features a different male protagonist: one man decides to commit robbery to pay for his ailing mother’s surgery, while the other commits a series of murders of successive fiancés of the woman he wants to marry. Both stories establish visual and narrative links with comedy since the cinematic source for the physical representation of the two characters is the comedic duo Laurel and Hardy.⁸ Sporting matching bowler hats and clothing evoking the 1920s, the reader follows the protagonists as they bumble through their slapstick adventures, many of which are recognisable as classic scenes inherited from comedic movies, especially those of the silent era. “Laurel” escapes from a guard dog by climbing a tree, finds a vase with an inscription “authentic Ming vase” which he accidentally destroys, and hides from a pursuing homeowner by holding up a frame around his face and pretending to be a painting. “Hardy’s” scenes are also informed by humour (including slapstick, although in a less exaggerated way), primarily through a juxtaposition of two types of repetition: that of unsuccessful proposals and that of cartoonishly perpetrated murders (one fiancé is killed by a dislodged chimney, another by bees angered by “Hardy”).

However, despite seemingly succeeding in their endeavours (the first man steals a painting that is a “Jasonified” version of Edvard Munch’s famous “The Scream” from 1893 and earns the money for the surgery by pawning it; the other man’s beloved, emotionally exhausted by loss, finally relents to one of his many proposals), both stories end in failure: the surgery is unsuccessful and the first man’s mother dies, while the woman from the other story is so depressed that she decides to hang herself just as her husband is nervously preparing for their nuptial night. Although “&” shares many similarities with other of Jason’s darkly comedic sketches, at this point in its story it diverges both from the source material of Laurel and Hardy and the repetitive joke pattern containing a closing punchline found in such stories as “Proto Film Noir”. As they come to terms with their respective failures and with seemingly nothing else to do, both “Laurel” and “Hardy” decide to go for a drink in the same bar, finally crossing paths when they find themselves sitting next to each other (Fig. 8), with the dominant hues of the colour red in the panel perhaps implying infernal punishment, which in turn evokes the end of “Proto Film Noir”. After the two men exchange glances, the story ends in complete silence, therefore both adding an ending typical of Jason’s works and simultaneously taking away the comedic punchline that the entire piece seemed

⁸ Stan Laurel (Arthur Stanley Jefferson, 1890–1965) and Oliver Hardy (Norvell Hardy, 1892–1957) appeared as a double act in numerous comedy movies between 1927 and 1955. In a post on his blog *cats without dogs* from 7 September 2011, Jason commented on the characters’ resemblance to the two actors: “One thing I completely screwed up in that story is that they were supposed to be Laurel and Hardy. Hence the title. It’s the story of how they met. Yes, I know, I should have drawn Hardy fatter! I don’t know what I was thinking... But maybe it’s just as well that nobody got it, as I assume the likeness of Laurel and Hardy might be copyrighted. So if nothing else, at least it kept me from being sued”.



Fig. 8. "&" (Jason 2009)
Sl. 8. „&“ (Jason 2009)

to be building towards. With that one crucial element of comedy stripped away, the structure of the joke is laid bare, and as the two men stare out of the panel and toward us, we are confronted with the dislocated structure of a slapstick comedy suddenly transformed into poignancy. In other words, while the comedic punchline may be missing, it has perhaps only been replaced by an entirely different “punch”: the impact of the protagonists’ final confrontation with failure and loneliness.

This distinctly non-comedic denouement casts light on the way Jason manipulates jokes, twisting their structure in such a way that his works confront us with our own expectations. Usually, jokes build up tension over time, frequently relying on repetition, and their tension is then released through laughter. According to the Relief Theory of humour, popularized by Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), laughter is used to relieve the tension created by accumulated energy: “In laughter [...] the conditions are present under which a sum of psychical energy which has hitherto been used for cathexis is allowed free discharge” (Freud 1905: 108). Freud provides several examples to reinforce his point, all taken from the stories of Mark Twain. One of these will remind the reader of Jason’s “Proto Film Noir” (Freud 1905: 166–167):

Mark Twain describes how his brother constructed a subterranean dwelling, into which he brought a bed, a table and a lamp and which he roofed over with a large piece of sailcloth with a hole in the middle. At night, however, after the hut was finished, a cow that was being driven home fell through the opening of the roof on to the table and put out the lamp. His brother patiently helped to get the beast out and put the establishment to rights again. Next night the same interruption was repeated and his brother behaved as before. And so it was every following night. Repetition makes the story comic, but Mark Twain ends it by reporting that on the forty-sixth night, when the cow fell through again, his brother finally remarked: “The thing’s beginning to get monotonous”.

The absurd repetition of an action aligns Twain’s story with the joke structure of “Proto Film Noir”, but the crucial element that seals the humour of both is found in the reader’s response. As Freud puts it, “what we had long expected to hear was that this obstinate set of misfortunes would make [Twain’s] brother angry” (167). What we get instead is, in the case of both Twain’s brother and Jason’s murderous caveman, comically mild frustration, expressed in very similar terms. Another of Freud’s examples, again taken from Twain, serves to illustrate how Jason’s “&” diverges from both the usual structure of a joke and the principles of Relief Theory. In that example, Twain again recounts the experiences of his brother, now employed as a worker on the construction of a road (Freud 1905: 166):

The premature explosion of a mine blew him up into the air and he came down again far away from the place where he had been working. We are bound to have feelings of sympathy for the victim of the accident and would like to ask whether he was injured by it. But when the story goes on to say that his brother had a half-day’s wages deducted for being absent from his place of employment we are entirely distracted from our pity and become almost as hard-hearted as the contractor and almost as indifferent to possible damage to the brother’s health.

In other words, the beginning of the story causes us to feel pity for Twain's brother, but upon reaching its end we realize that this emotion would be unnecessary: "the expenditure of the pity, which was already prepared, becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off" (Freud 1905: 166). This approach to joke-building is used several times in Jason's "&" in both of the parallel stories. At one point it seems that "Laurel" has been shot in the face from a musket, but the tension is quickly relieved when the bullet falls harmlessly from the muzzle of the gun. In another scene, disappointed by his beloved's refusal of his proposal, "Hardy" carelessly discards the flowers he has brought for her, only to discover that they have landed on a policeman's head. However, the tension is again dissipated, this time by Hardy's nervous smile. The story thus accustoms the reader to the repetitive rhythm of tension and release through laughter, but this common structure of a joke is interrupted once the ending is reached. The overarching tension of the two central issues (Will the surgery be paid for and succeed? Will "Hardy" win over his beloved?) is continually built upon, only to be resolved not through laughter and dissipation of tension, but through a sudden transformation into disappointment and loss. Ultimately, if there is any kind of joke hidden in the sombre ending, it is a joke at the reader's expense: any pity or concern for the characters which we may have built up and then laughed off throughout the story is suddenly summoned again, and we observe the characters' deadpan expressions in the final panels with laughter frozen in our throats.

This technique is repeatedly employed elsewhere in Jason's works and can be found in such graphic novels as *The Living and the Dead* and *You Can't Get There from Here* (2004). The two books are also similar in that they both use the genres of horror and romance movies to enact their playful rearrangement of classic Gothic tropes and characters, blending their respective sources in similar ways. As mentioned above, in *The Living and the Dead* silent era movies such as those starring Charlie Chaplin merge with a Romero-style zombie thriller, with both genres influencing each other in the process. The reader follows the adventures of a poor dishwasher and the prostitute he saves from a zombie attack as they try to find shelter in a world overrun by the undead. The traditional romance plot of a silent era movie and Jason's deadpan humour thus bleed into the zombie thriller, but the tragic ending of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* informs the ending of the overall story: when the protagonist discovers that his companion has become infected, he decides to allow her to turn him into a zombie rather than face the prospect of having to kill her. The two genres of romantic comedy and zombie thriller finally come together in the closing scene (Fig. 9) as we observe the protagonist and his partner, now both zombies, attack a lone survivor and then share their victim's meat in a moment that manages to be both tender and grotesquely humorous, and yet neither completely parodic nor completely sincere. Such tonal ambiguity between the comic and the Gothic then serves to further underscore the ambiguity between the living and the dead on which the book closes: the moment of incongruity in which the dead continue to follow the social customs and even emotions associated with the living embodies the distinctly Gothic "concern with the permeability of boundaries" (Horner and Zlosnik 2005: 1).

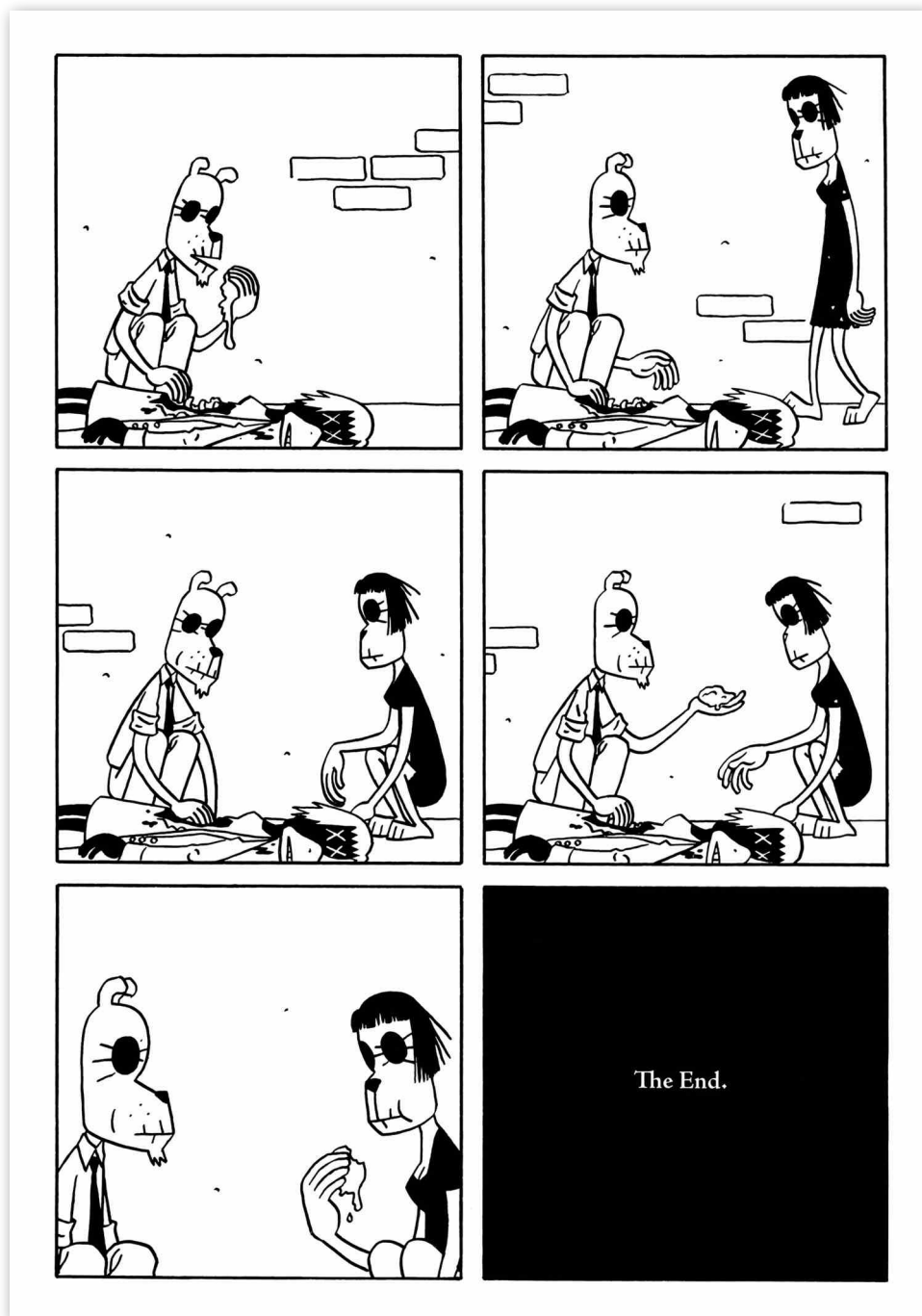


Fig. 9. *The Living and the Dead* (Jason 2006)
Sl. 9. *Živi i mrtvi* (Jason 2006)

Something akin to this logic occurs again in *You Can't Get There from Here*, which uses Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) for its narrative basis, but primarily employs the films *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) for its visual identity. In an initial parodic twist on the story of Frankenstein, the novel depicts the problems of a scientist whose monster, lacking an appropriate partner, fulfils his sexual urges by stealing pornographic magazines from stores and masturbating in front of a woman in a shower before being jailed. In an attempt to meet his monster's desires, the scientist animates a female corpse, upon which his two creations gradually develop a normal romantic relationship. However, as the lonely scientist soon becomes jealous of their bond, eventually abducting the monster's companion and even committing rape, the story develops beyond the initial parodic reconfiguration of *Frankenstein* and into a blend of comedy and tragedy. When at the end of the story a set of circumstances leads to the male and female monsters becoming separated by distance, the female monster wanders in search of her partner but, unable to find him and scarred by her experience of rape, ultimately decides to rebury herself in a cemetery. Despite a touching side-story of the scientist's lonely hunchback assistant, who successfully fulfils his wish of finding love by developing a relationship with one of the scientist's reanimated corpses, the final scene of the female monster digging a hole for herself complicates the reader's response, again invoking the logic of oscillating between comedy and horror, romance and tragedy, parody and pathos. That this occurs in a text engaged in an intertextual reliance on and rearrangement of Gothic tropes reflects the "essential hybridity" of what Horner and Zlosnik term comic Gothic, as well as the genre's tendency to "invite a conscious, self-reflexive engagement with the Gothic mode" (2005: 12).

One possible way of reading this oscillating dynamic is provided by Vermeulen and Akker (2017) in their use of the concept of metamodernism, a term they employ to represent certain fluctuations between modernism and postmodernism. Although the term "metamodernism" has a long history (Yousef 2017: 37–38), the two theorists use it to describe tendencies in the arts to swing between and beyond modernism and postmodernism, or between sincerity and irony. Such works exhibit a "both/neither" dynamic, simultaneously being both modern and postmodern, and yet neither entirely: "Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (6). The authors are careful to point out that this oscillation should not be thought of "as a balance between; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the modern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm" (ibid.). In this constant movement from modernism to postmodernism and back, "[t]he metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all" (ibid.). The authors identify such practices in the films of David Lynch, and their description of the director's approach is applicable

to Jason's graphic novels since the works of both authors use the method of "alternating from comic to tragic, from romantic to horrific and back; turning the commonplace into a site of ambiguity, of mystery, and unfamiliarity, to us as much as to its characters" (10).

There is an interesting correlation to be found between Jason's approach to humour and Lynch's *Rabbits* (2002), a series of short surreal web movies about anthropomorphic rabbits presented as a sitcom warped into horror. The tagline on the author's website describes the "sitcom" in the following words: "In a nameless city, deluged by a continuous rain, three rabbits live with a fearful mystery".⁹ The show features the disjointed conversations of three humanoid rabbits, Suzie, Jane, and Jack (played by human actors wearing brown rabbit suits, over which they wear normal human clothing), their almost incomprehensible dialogue punctuated by a laugh track that is seemingly prompted by what the characters are saying, although their statements are never humorous. The deep shadows and dark colours of the set, coupled with an ominous soundtrack and a continuous sound of rain, create a sinister atmosphere, which Étienne Poulard terms "an implicit sense of menace" (2017: 55), one that is never alleviated by the broken logic of the laugh track. These "traumatic outbreaks of canned laughter" (ibid.) seem to be triggered by the distinctly unhumorous lines spoken by the characters, for instance "What time is it?", "It is dark outside", or "Where is it that you think I went?", while the entrance of Jack onto the set is always followed by the audience whooping and cheering loudly, even though at such moments Jack merely stands still, apparently waiting for the clamour to die down (the blank expression of his mask very much evocative of Jason's characters' deadpan expressions). Despite the inclusion of all the necessary elements of a sitcom (a limited set of characters, canned laughter, limited audience participation, a fixed perspective on a set representing a living room), the signifiers of comedy are undercut by "traumatic incursions, including the sudden appearance of a burning hole in the wall or the intrusion of a demonic voice talking backwards" (ibid.).¹⁰ Even if we would welcome laughter which would break the tension, Poulard claims that it is "most unlikely that we, the so-called 'real' audience, will be laughing" (ibid.). Unless, that is, we decide to laugh at ourselves and the failure of our attempts to clearly demarcate the categories of comedy and horror in the ambiguous "both/neither" dynamic of both Lynch's and Jason's works. And this perpetually deferred demarcation between comedy and tragedy or comedy and horror is precisely what allows us to examine the way we respond to these authors' works: just when we are about to sympathise with Lynch's and Jason's characters, the ridiculous prods us in the ribs, and yet if we wish to laugh, the bizarre animal-human hybrids turn out to be, against all odds, strangely worthy of our empathy. Although Jason's stories do not travel as far into the territory of the surreal

⁹ <<http://www.lychnet.com/rabbits/>> (accessed 20 May 2020).

¹⁰ According to *LynchNet*, another of Lynch's planned but as yet unrealised projects based on the manipulation of the sitcom framework is titled *Dream of the Bovine*: "Co-written with Robert Engels in 1994, this was to be comedy about three people who once were cows. They still behave like cows, but look like humans".

where Lynch's films operate,¹¹ both of the authors' works involve a reconfiguration of comedic structure and a withdrawal of classic triggers such as slapstick or funny repartee, ultimately confronting us with our own ambiguous responses to the both/neither dynamic of such works.

Conclusion

It was the aim of this paper to explore how the apparent simplicity of Jason's graphic novels belies a deeply ambiguous nature, one that rests on the complex use of humour and reliance on tropes borrowed from children's and genre literature. While Jason's works exhibit surface markers of such comic sources as Mickey Mouse cartoons and the slapstick humour of Charlie Chaplin's movies, any reductive readings are subverted through the use of deadpan humour more aligned with Buster Keaton and an unpredictable oscillation between comedy and poignancy. Visual, textual, and structural ambiguity is everywhere in Jason's works, whether imbued in their genre-bending tales, intertextual evocations of a variety of sources (music, films, cartoons, novels, other comic books, etc.), or in the undecidability of their tone. At once serious and comic, some of Jason's stories maintain their tonal liminality by simultaneously employing and undermining the classic structure of a repetition-based joke by both building towards and withdrawing comic relief. As seen on the example of such stories as "&", *The Living and the Dead*, and *You Can't Get There from Here*, Jason's narrative and visual style works within the metamodernist both/neither dynamic: both touching and ridiculous, and yet neither entirely parodic nor fully resolved into pathos, Jason's stories place the reader in the position of his rabbit-like character who, after almost drowning, suddenly finds himself on the surface again, staring at the death figure of Mickey Mouse occupying his boat and embodying the undecidability of tenor in Jason's work. The question which almost always faces the reader is therefore the unresolvable bind of whether one should laugh or cry, for the joke in one panel may in the very next one turn out to be at the expense of the reader who, having already laughed, is once again asked to summon their pity for Jason's unexpectedly sympathetic creations. This ambiguity between humour and sadness is, even at the very end of Jason's stories, rarely resolved: the ridiculous, hollow-eyed animal-humans stare into empty space and should be entirely laughable, but the subversion of the joke structure invites the reader to map the implied emotionality of the scene onto the characters' deadpan expressions and acknowledge that in this process Jason's "sad clown" hybrids become simultaneously both comic and tragic, and thus surprisingly human.

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¹¹ One prominent example being "If You Steal" (Jason 2015), which incorporates Jason's versions of the paintings of the surrealist artist René Magritte (1898–1967) into a non-linear and highly disorientating narrative about mental health.

the Dead (Jason 2006), *I Killed Adolf Hitler* (Jason 2007), *The Last Musketeer* (Jason 2008), “Emily Says Hello” (Jason 2009), “Proto Film Noir” (Jason 2009), “&” (Jason 2009), *Jason Conquers America* (Jason 2011), and “New Face” (Jason 2015) in both printed and electronic versions of this issue of *Libri & Liberi*.

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Smijati se ili plakati? Dvosmislenost i humor u Jasonovim stripovima

U radu se proučava kako se Jasonovom uporabom manjka, ozbiljnosti i redukcije prikriva postupak temeljen na višestrukoj dvosmislenosti koja uključuje miješanje žanrova, razigranu intertekstualnost te iznenađujuću emocionalnu dubinu likova i priče. Razmatra se veza humora i vizualne, tekstualne i strukturalne dvosmislenosti u Jasonovim djelima, kao i ambivalentnost čitateljeve reakcije, ilustrira se spajanje oprječnih žanrova te istovremeno korištenje motiva iz dječje književnosti i raznolikih žanrovskih filmova (poput znanstvene fantastike, kriminalističkih trilera, filmova o pljački i horora) te istražuje Jasonov postupak podriivanja očekivanja komičnoga olakšanja uskraćivanjem strukturalnih dijelova vica (najčešće zaključne poante vica) ili umetanjem neočekivanih elemenata (poput psihološke dubine).

Ključne riječi: dječja književnost, dvosmislenost, humor, intertekstualnost, Jason