

# “Modesty Blaise” Cut up in Sweden: The Challenges of Adapting a Newspaper Comic Strip to the Comic Book Format

Pascal Lefèvre  
(LUCA School of Arts)

[Accepted for publication: 16/12/2021]

## Abstract

EVERY graphic narrative is originally made for a specific publication format, but when a comic is selected for translation, it is not uncommon for the local publisher to choose a different format. This transition from one publication format to another can give rise to several problematic issues, as seen in the case study of “Modesty Blaise” presented here, which focuses on how the first story of that series went from a British daily comic strip to a Swedish comics magazine (called there *serietidning*). After proposing some prototypical descriptions of the relevant publication formats, the case study focuses on the formal modifications that both the text and the pictures underwent in their journey from the UK to Sweden. The publication format of the Swedish comics magazine (based on the US-American comic book) was not well suited to publishing the daily tiers, because these were slightly too wide for the smaller pages of the magazine. To make the daily tiers fit the comics magazine format, panels were vertically cropped, or conversely horizontally extended, at times even completely deleted. The visual treatment of the dialogue balloons was similarly problematic. This article argues that these modifying practices impacted the way the comic was experienced and moreover raise the issue of derogatory treatment of the artists’ moral rights.

## Introduction

THE crucial role of the publication format has long been neglected in comics translation studies. Given the variety of publication formats worldwide, only a complete volume would suffice to study them more or less exhaustively. This article will focus on one telling example of the use of an incompatible publication format in the translation process—namely, the adaptation of the first episode of the popular British daily strip “Modesty Blaise” (from 1963) by the Swedish comic magazine *Agent X9*. Through a detailed case study the various formal modifications will be observed: changes in hand lettering and balloons, cropping or extending of panels, deletion of panels, etc. The consequences of these modifications for the artwork and the reader’s experience will be analyzed and discussed.

---

*New Readings* 18 (2022): 70–87.

e-ISSN: 2634-6850 – Article doi:[10.18573/newreadings.129](https://doi.org/10.18573/newreadings.129)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence.

URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

The copyright of this article is owned by the author.

### Context, Corpus, Literature Review, and Method

SWEDEN has a long tradition of translating syndicated comics from the USA and, to a lesser degree, the UK (Hegersfors 147; Strömberg 33). Since the early twentieth century, Swedish publishers of comics have roughly followed the main trends of those anglophone markets. "Modesty Blaise" was a series that for various reasons appealed to a broad public in the 1960s and '70s: it played on the popularity of spy fiction in the context of the Cold War (see, among others, *James Bond*), featuring a sexy but strong female character, quite typical for the liberal 1960s (Landy; White). The comic strip itself was an accomplished product, well written by Peter O'Donnell and nicely drawn by Jim Holdaway. On top of that, it was cheaper to translate a syndicated comic than to pay a Swedish author to create an original one. Also, the character of Modesty Blaise was not completely unknown in Sweden before the comic was translated, because two Swedish Modesty novels had previously been put on the market.<sup>1</sup>

The corpus of this case study consists of the original British publication of the first "Modesty Blaise" episode, called "La Machine", and its Swedish translation as "Mordligan". The British strip ran from 13 May to 21 September 1963 in the daily *London Evening Standard*. Given the difficulties in consulting the original newspaper publication, my analysis is based on a 2004 reprint of the original comic strips in album format (Titan Books). The original tier numbers assigned by Artist Jim Holdaway and writer Peter O'Donnell will be used to refer to specific passages. The first Swedish adaptation of the "Modesty Blaise" comic strip into a comics magazine format (*serietidning* in Swedish) dates from 1967; this *Agent Modesty Blaise* story was published by Semic under the title of "Mordligan". Eleven years later a new adaptation was printed in another Swedish comics magazine, *Agent X9*. This version from 1978 forms the basis for the comparison with the original British comic strip.

While the comics market has been organized along formal distinctions such as publication formats since its various starts, and a few early articles analyzed adaptations from one format into another (Ciment; Baetens and Lefèvre 87), it wasn't until the year 2000 that the role of comics formats was first explicitly theorized by comics scholars (Lefèvre "Importance"; Couch):

A format is not only defined by its materiality (the size, the paper quality, etc.) but also by its temporal aspects (does it have a temporal regularity or is it published only once at a precise time?) and editorial choices (how long can a chapter or story be, what are the taboos?). [...] Of course, the format will not and cannot explain every aspect or detail of the comic concerned, but at a fundamental level it is responsible for major characteristics. (Lefèvre, "Importance" 98)

Every publication format thus offers the individual creator a bounded set of alternatives. In a later study, I detailed how the individuality of each artist was to

---

<sup>1</sup> The two translated Modesty Blaise novels were *Köpa henne går inte* (1965) and *Sabeltanden* (1966).

some extent moulded by a set of shared conventions or editorial guidelines and practices (Lefèvre, “Empirical Study”). The acknowledgement of the importance of publication formats in comics translation studies dates from an even more recent period: it was only from the 2010s onwards that some scholars (Sell; Zanettin, “Visual Adaptation”; Rota,) started to consider this aspect—however, without any reference to those earlier contributions.

Even though the “Modesty Blaise” strip ran for several decades, was translated into various languages, and had many spin-offs (films, novels), the critical literature on this series remains rather limited. The scarce scholarship deals mostly with gender or national identity in the novels (Goh; White; De Pauw; Crossley) or focuses on the filmic adaptations (Chapman; Costa; Miller; Rodgers). Academic engagements with the comic strips don’t go beyond short mentions of the series in comics encyclopedias (Moliterni et al.; Gaumer), British historical studies (Gravett and Stanbury), or exhibition catalogues (Morgan). In Sweden, however, the popularity of “Modesty Blaise” gave birth to a monograph about the character (Mauritzon and Mauritzon).<sup>2</sup>

### Prototypical Definitions of Two Relevant Publication Formats

It is impossible to give an a-historical definition of the components of a particular publication format, because practically every format shows a degree of variation: from place to place, across time, from culture to culture. I have previously explored the particularities of some publication formats, like that of the Belgian comics weeklies of the 1950s (“Empirical Study”), or how two publication formats could become intertwined, as the dual publication system of the daily-album in Flanders (“Narration”). For the purposes of this article it is thus important to historically and conceptually situate the two publication formats involved—that of the daily comic strip of the original publication, on one hand, and that of the Swedish adaptation, which is related to the comic book and the comics magazine, on the other. A brief historical sketch of their respective evolutions is indispensable.

#### 1. Daily Comic Strip

Usually the term *comic strip* is reserved for a particular set of comics, namely those that are in the first instance produced for daily newspapers (Lefèvre, “Newspaper Strips”). The prototypical concept of a daily newspaper strip is quite simple:

---

<sup>2</sup> Former editor at Semic, Janne Lundström, offers an insightful testimonial of how translations and adaptations were handled at the magazine *Agent X9* (Storn 189–94). The foreign syndicate or publisher would send high quality prints/proofs to work on. In the case of a daily newspaper, such a proof consisted of the six tiers of a week in the daily. Copies thereof were given to the translators. The editor then took care of the final edition of the translated texts and the distribution of the panels in the new publication format. This rude mounting of the redistributed panels went to the studio manager of their drawing studio. The draftsman that was available at the time executed the necessary modifications: removing speech bubbles and text boxes, changing the borders of the panels, or deleting panels altogether. Next, the studio manager sent the templates and translations to the letterer, because lettering was mainly done by hand by freelancers, usually women.

every day has one tier, and there is some kind of serial link (usually recurring characters). One could argue that this publication format was a new loot of the tree of comics publishing in the press. In the nineteenth century, comics were already published in weeklies, monthlies, or magazines. Towards the end of that century a new publication format was forged for the Sunday supplements of the US-American dailies, the so-called Sunday Pages. This format consisted of the weekly publication of a comic strip with recurring character(s) (like the Katzenjammer Kids). Two main types of narrative were possible: self-contained short stories (usually gags) or a continuing story that was spread across several weeks. The originally US-American publication format went through a process of standardization and successfully travelled across borders, making it, still today, a recognizable way of publishing comics. The core business of the US-American syndicates was to find as many press outlets as possible. Book collections, often in landscape format that respected the original tiers, followed the initial success of the newspaper publications (Goulart 7–14).

In the existing literature (e.g. Walker) the size of a comic strip is usually measured by its width only, which is indicated by the number of columns it occupies. But the number of columns on a page can vary, just as the size of the page itself. I am therefore proposing another way of describing the size of a comic strip, by indicating a tier's aspect ratio (width to height). It is common to refer to the aspect ratio of single images, but this measure can also be used to track changes to the relative dimensions of complete tiers over time, independently of their absolute size. Table 1 shows the evolution of the aspect ratio by means of a few typical examples.

Year	Title	Country	Ratio width/height in decimals	Approximate aspect ratio
1920s	"Mutt and Jeff"	USA	3.3	3:1
1930s	"Secret Agent X"	USA	4.4	9:2
Early 1940s	"Barnaby"	USA	4	4:1
Early 1940s	"Mickey Mouse"	USA	4.5	9:2
Late 1940s	"Suske en Wiske"	Belgium	2.9	3:1
1960s	"Beetle Bailey"	UK	3.4	3:1
1960s	"Modesty Blaise"	UK	3.4	3:1
1970s	"Garfield"	USA	3.2	3:1

Table 1. Changes to the aspect ratio of daily comic strips over time.

The table shows, among other things, that following a significant reduction of the ratio after the Second World War, the daily strips would never be restored to their pre-war proportions (Walker 201–02). Despite their reduced daily format, continuity strips (detectives, westerns, soap operas) still flourished in the United States in the post-war era. In the long run (from the 1960s onwards), big-foot

humour would again dominate the comics page, as they did at the start of the twentieth century (Walker 465). Henceforth serial narratives became the terrain of television, as this new medium met consumers' interest in ongoing narratives better than daily comic strips.

The aspect ratio has also implications for the book publication of newspaper strips. A ratio width/height in excess of 4 makes it imperative for book reprints aiming to preserve the original tiers to use quite a broad paper format to keep the images and text readable. As a consequence, most reprints of dailies with an elevated aspect ratio opt either for a quadrangular format or, more frequently, for an oblong landscape format (as used in the early twentieth century). To avoid such issues, a possible solution was to make the tiers for the newspaper publication less wide from the start.<sup>3</sup>

For the example discussed here, "Modesty Blaise", some additional basic conventions of a daily comic strip need further attention: first, the given dimensions of the tier; second, the particular aims of the first and last panel of a tier, respectively.

### Fixed Dimensions of Tier

"Modesty Blaise" was tailored for daily instalments at a rate of one tier per day; the repetition of the series title (at the left top corner) is a clear indication of that design. This publication format forced the authors to work within a strict formal carcass: the standardized width/height ratio of a tier was fixed at approximately 4:1 (or 3.36)—that is, a tier's width was four times its height. Within such a strict format the possibilities of varying panel dimensions were by definition quite limited (for a detailed study of tier formats, see Chavanne). Individual panels did not vary in height—the height of the tier set the standard height of all the panels—, but only in width. Generally the artist drew three panels per tier, sometimes four, depending on what he and scriptwriter O'Donnell wanted to tell in a given instalment.

### Conventional Aims of a Daily Tier and Its Panels

O'Donnell and Holdaway's original breakdown of the story into tiers aims at ensuring that every instalment contains an interesting development, enough to drive the story forward and maintain the readers' interest in the next instalment. As Kelleter states, there is a

---

<sup>3</sup> This was successfully done, for example, by the Flemish comic artist Willy Vandersteen in collaboration with his publishers: two short daily tiers (aspect ratio 2.9) corresponded to half an album page (Lefèvre, "Narration"); so, the collection of tiers into an album did not require any modifications. The success of this dual publication format (serving dailies and books alike) was imitated by almost all other Flemish daily strips. Contrary to most other newspaper strip producing countries, the Flemish region in Belgium had a very intensive reprint production of daily comics, which to some extent continues until today. The dual publication format was the basis for the success and longevity of various series.

close entanglement of production and reception in serial storytelling. [...] This sets the practice of watching a running series apart from the practice of reading a stand-alone novel or watching a classical feature film. Repeated temporal overlap between ongoing publication and ongoing reception allows serial audiences to become involved in a narrative's progress. In more general terms, seriality can extend—and normally does extend—the sphere of storytelling onto the sphere of story consumption. (21)

As I have explained elsewhere ("Importance"), in consequence of the daily publishing schedule, the external time (the dates of the publication in the newspaper) could influence the internal time of the narration; but not all comic strips took advantage of this particular feature of their publication format.

Furthermore, it was also common to try to end a sequence precisely in the last panel of a tier (e.g., tiers 17, 26, 32, 40, 42, 43, 87, 111). In such cases the provisional end of the narration would coincide with the end of the instalment. However, since this was often impossible to achieve, in the majority of instalments a scene continued to the next tier. The first panel of the subsequent instalment was, in some ways, quite a fluid continuation of the last panel of the previous one (e.g., the transition of tiers 1–2, 49–50, 92–93, 110–11). Instead of giving a verbal recapitulation (like in some US-American comic strips of the pre-war era), the visual representation "recapitulated" the situation of the last panel of the previous instalment. As a consequence, a day's wait for the reader did not concur with the story time, because in the story there would only be a time jump of a few seconds or minutes. The first panel of a tier was thus never an exact repetition, which would have been too redundant.

In some instances (especially at the end of the week), the authors tried to invest the last panel of an instalment as a moment of great suspense (e.g., tiers 58, 59, 92, 104), making the readers wonder what will happen next, thereby encouraging them to return to the strip the following day. Again, these practices were invited by the publication format of the daily strip itself. We could label them as "good practices" because they make good use of the affordances (in the sense of Gibson) that this particular publication format offers, but they are, of course, merely options that an artist can choose to use or not.

## 2. Comic Book/Comic Magazine

For a description of the publication format to which *Modesty Blaise* was adapted, a definition of *comic book* is needed as well. The term *comic book* is somewhat ambivalent because it has been used for various kinds of collections of comics in magazine or book form. For our purpose, we will draw upon the typical North American comics magazine format, which started in the 1930s. In terms of their material appearance, comics magazines are thin stapled periodicals of rather poor quality paper with floppy covers, but in full colour. The number of pages varies and has decreased over time, today containing on average 32 pages. Their page size has also varied over time (Anonymous): in addition to the prototypical

format—the width has decreased from an initial 19.7 cm in the 1940s to 17.5 cm today, while the height has remained constant at 27.6 cm—, there were also magazines with a slightly larger size of 21.7 x 27.9 cm, as in the case of *Mad*, *Heavy Metal*, etc. Although in absolute terms the difference between the dominant format and the larger size of these latter magazines may seem rather small, it was significant enough to signal to the consumer that these magazines offered a somewhat different content than that of the typical US-American comic book. Comic book historians Hubert H. Crawford (432) and Ron Goulart (275) explain that due to their different size (and higher price), these Warren comics magazines were not classified as comic books and consequently did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Comics Code.

US comic books carry various genres, but they are perhaps most widely known for the superhero genre, which, in fact, developed predominantly in this publication format. Generally, North American comic books carry only material that was explicitly created for this format.

Some US-American comic book series were translated and published as comic books in Scandinavia. Unlike in the United States, this publication format was also used both for the publication of other kinds of comics from abroad (like daily comic strips) and for domestically produced series (like *Bamse*), although these remained a minority. It was at the end of the 1940s that comic books gained in popularity across Scandinavia, reaching their peak in the 1970s (Strömberg 57). Some comic books like *Kalle Anka & C:o* [sic] (the Swedish version of Donald Duck) are still published nowadays. So, in the immediate post-war period the US-American comic book format was far more prominent than, for instance, the French album format (Strömberg 73). Among the varied spectrum of genres published in comic books—superheroes, funny animals, humour, horse riding—were also the translations of foreign detective stories, usually from the daily press. Swedish comic books or magazines usually carried the material of a title character (like the *Agent Modesty Blaise* magazine 1967–69), but there were also anthologies, like *Agent X9*—originally titled *X9* in 1969 and published under the longer title from 1971—, that collected episodes from various series.

Valerio Rota sums up the three basic options regarding publication formats for adapting a comic to another cultural context: the receiving country can

1. publish it in the same publication format as the original,
2. adapt it to a local publication format, or
3. publish it in another format, that differs both from the original and the local ones.

Although these distinctions may sound quite straightforward, in practice, the idea of local formats needs to be nuanced, because various so-called local formats are actually variations or blatant imitations of foreign formats. The fact that the comic book format was so prevalent in Swedish comics publishing does not make it

an essentially original Swedish format, but rather a Scandinavian variation—the same happens for instance in Finland—of the US-American comic book format; the Swedes call it *serietidning* or *seriemagasin*. To what extent Swedish readers saw the format of their comics magazines as a US-American format is uncertain, but it was quite obvious to them that Swedish comic books mostly contained US-American content.<sup>4</sup> When we compare *Agent X9* to the typical US comic book of the 1970s, similarities as well as differences emerge (see table 2).

	<b>US comic book</b> (except underground publications)	<b>Swedish <i>serietidning</i></b> <i>Agent X9</i>
<b>Typical size (in cm)</b>	18.4 x 27.6	17 x 26
<b>Periodicity</b>	Monthly (bi-monthly, quarterly)	Monthly
<b>Colour</b>	Full colour	Black and white
<b>Number of pages</b>	32 and variations (38)	98
<b>Paper quality</b>	Rather low	Rather low
<b>Print quality</b>	Fair	Quite high
<b>Cover</b>	Floppy	Floppy
<b>Typical content</b>	Superheroes, Fantasy, Disney, adaptations of film/television, etc.	Detective
	Leading character and anthologies	Anthology
<b>Binding</b>	Stapled	Glued

Table 2. Comparison between the average US-American comic book and the Swedish *serietidning Agent X9*.

While the paper size, floppy cover, and low paper quality of *serietidnings* approximate to the US-American model, the Swedish comic books do not always resemble their typical American counterparts: early 1970s US-American comic books ordinarily were in full colour, whereas a Swedish magazine like *Agent X9* was, apart

<sup>4</sup> I inquired with the members of the *Facebook* group on Swedish comics “Seriefrämjandets Tankebubbla—Thought bubble” how they thought readers in Sweden considered the format in the 1960s and ’70s. Of the various reactions, I reproduce here the response by Håkan Boström: “I think most people perceived it as a Swedish format, as they grew up with children’s comic books in the same format, and some of the big titles had Swedish comic and/or feature material such as crossword puzzles that connected to the tradition of the family magazines. When I sometimes read American comic books, they felt like a foreign format, thin and with strange advertising where the heroes themselves promoted certain products” (my translation of the response in Swedish: “Jag tror att de flesta uppfattade det som ett svenskt format, i och med att man vuxit upp med barnserietidningar i samma format och några av de stora titlarna hade svenskt serie- och/eller featurematerial typ korsord som anslöt till traditionen från familjetidningarna. När jag ibland läste amerikanska serietidningar kändes de som ett främmande format, tunna och med underlig reklam där hjältarna själva promotade vissa produkter.”)



from the cover, in black-and-white. Furthermore, an issue of *Agent X9* had many more pages than the average US-American comic book at the time. Finally, while in the USA most comics published had been created specifically for the comic book format, the Swedish magazine *Agent X9* published comics that were initially made for completely different formats, like daily comic strips. For instance, in addition to "Modesty Blaise" the first issue of *Agent X9* included instalments of three other comic strips (one US-American, two British). To illustrate these adaptation practices, I will now compare the Swedish adaptation of "La Machine" with its original British version.

### Modifications of the Verbal Part in the Swedish Adaptation

**I**N a comic strip like "Modesty Blaise" we find verbal text foremost in dialogue balloons, thought balloons, descriptive text boxes, and to a lesser degree, in the drawings themselves (like a letter or poster in the scene). Except for some diegetic text in the background (like the name of a shop, or a road sign), all this verbal material needed to be translated into Swedish.

By consistently erasing the series title in the first panel of each tier of the original publication (including the attribution "by Peter O'Donnell" first introduced in tier 25) and Holdaway's signature (placed in a small white box at varying locations within one of the panels), the adaptation not only erased redundant information that was unnecessary for the simultaneous publication of a complete episode, but also concealed the original publication format. Readers of *Agent X9* were not to be reminded of the original publication format, but rather they were led to accept the adapted version as the "right" one. Given that most Swedish readers at that time would not have had access to the original version, there was little risk of a comparison between the two.

Unlike in literary translation, which uses mechanical typesetting, in comics translation, lettering plays a prominent role because—historically at least—all text is typically hand lettered. In comics, traditionally script is used, which situates itself somewhere between personal handwriting and mechanical typesetting; script reconciles the clarity of a typeface with the personal flair of handwriting (Baetens and Lefèvre 17). Though both versions of "Modesty Blaise", the original and the adaptation, use all-capital hand lettering, the lettering of the Swedish version differs on various accounts: the size is somewhat larger, the letter and line spacing is moderately bigger, and more words are written in bold. As a consequence, the original balloons were not big enough to hold the translated text, which, in turn, required the balloons to be enlarged. In consequence, more often than in the original version, the Swedish balloons run across the panel borders. Sometimes the Swedish adaptation even deviates from the conventional round and elliptical balloon shape. For example, the balloon of the last panel of tier 48 is replaced by a jagged outline, suggesting a more "explosive" delivery of the statement than in the original version. The balloons occupy proportionally much more space in

the panels than in the English version, which is often visually not a refined option insofar as they overlay parts of the background, are visually too prominent, and reduce the “breathing space” in these adapted panels.

The original choice of a particular type of lettering is not always respected in the adaptation. For example, the very particular handwriting on a note (tier 71) is not imitated, and an official file in a monospaced typewriter font (tier 10) becomes hand lettered in the Swedish version, which is visually less plausible for this kind of document (see fig. 1). Overall, the Swedish treatment of the verbal text gives a less refined impression than the original, paying insufficient attention to the nuances of the original design.



Fig. 1. Left: monospaced typewriter font in British version of “Modesty Blaise” episode (tier 10). Right: hand lettering in Swedish translation. (Courtesy of dmg media licensing ©Associated Newspapers Ltd.)

### Modifications of the Pictorial Part in the Swedish Adaptation

THE former editor at Semic, Janne Lundström, affirms that there were some incompatibility issues between the format of a daily comic strip and that of the Swedish comics magazine. While the daily consisted of three panels, the Swedish format only had space for 2.5 panels (Storn). We can alternatively express this discrepancy in terms of the tiers’ respective aspect ratios (see table 3).

	Ratio width/height in decimals
Original British comic strip	3.4
Swedish adaptation in comic magazine	2.57

Table 3. Comparison of width/height ratio of tiers of the original British daily strip “Modesty Blaise” with its Swedish adaptation in the comic magazine *Agent X9*.

As a consequence of the different aspect ratios, the adapted version could not accommodate the same number of panels per tier as the original publication. To solve this problem, the Swedish adaptation reduced the three (sometimes four) panels of the British original to two (sometimes three) panels per tier. (Accommodating four panels in such a short tier without mutilating the original panels was out of the question.) This resulted in quite a different rhythm of the tiers in the Swedish adaptation. Furthermore, the panels could not keep their original location within the tier, which at times undermined a panel's specific function. A panel that was originally conceived as a cliff-hanger, for example, could become the second panel of the new recomposed tier (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Comparison of the original British version (tiers 104 & 105 at the top) and the Swedish adapted version (bottom tier). The deleted panels of the original version are marked in red, the vertical croppings in light red. (Courtesy of dmg media licensing ©Associated Newspapers Ltd.)

To make the panels fit the new tier format various procedures were applied, which can be categorized in three kinds: vertical cropping, horizontal extension



of panels, and deletion of complete panels. These practices can be observed very clearly, as illustrated in figure 3, which shows how the first eleven tiers of the original British version (at the top) were adapted in the Swedish version (at the bottom). Vertical cropping is indicated in the original version in light red, deletion of panels in darker red; the horizontal extension of panels is marked in green in the adapted Swedish version.



Fig. 3. Visual overview of the pictorial modifications of the first eleven tiers of "Modesty Blaise". Top: Original British comic. Bottom: Swedish adaptation.

This sample is representative of the whole of the adaptation, as we will see. But let us now discuss in more detail the different kinds of pictorial modifications.

### 1. Vertical cropping

The majority of changes are vertical croppings at the left-hand and/or right-hand side of the panel; this occurs in about one panel out of three. One can compare this procedure to the cropping of cinemascope films to adjust them to the aspect ratio of the television screen, but in that case the cropping is constant and consistent. The Swedish adaptation delivers more variation: usually 10 to 20% of the panel is cropped, but never more than 40%.

Generally, the consequences for the understanding of the story are rather limited, because crucial information is rarely deleted by this procedure. It is, in fact, a convention for traditional comic artists not to situate the

most important information close to the border of the panel. Nevertheless, such vertical croppings change the global composition of the panel because proficient comic artists like Holdaway compose the scene also in regard to the panel borders.

## 2. Horizontal extension

In some cases (about one panel in three) the original panel is extended on the left-hand and/or right-hand side: this usually involves just blank space, but in a few cases the original drawing of the scene needed some extension.

- (a) Adding blank space: Holdaway, originally, leaves a lot of blank space in his panels, because there is no need to fill the complete panel with less important or irrelevant information. One of the traditional conventions of cartooning is that one does not have to provide detailed backgrounds in every single panel. It is therefore quite easy to extend the already blank space of the original panel. But as with vertical cropping, adding blank space can impact on the general composition of the panel, often in a negative way.
- (b) Adding drawing: in the case that important elements (like part of a person or of the decor) run up to the very border of the original panel, extending the panel horizontally often requires the adapter to expand the drawing of the panel to show what originally was "offscreen". This implies more work than just adding blank space. While most vertical croppings reduce the width of the panel by 10 to 20%, the extensions usually add a similar percentage of space to the width of the original panel. Only in a few exceptional cases of "Mordligan", a panel has been stretched to fill the complete tier. Never in this episode do the added drawn elements deliver additional information relevant to the understanding of the narration. Again, the horizontal extension of panels does not change the reading fundamentally, but—as in the modifications discussed before—it changes the original composition of the panels concerned.

## 3. Deletion of whole panels

In very few cases (15 out of a total of 448 panels, or 3.3%) panels are dropped entirely. This kind of adaptation risks, by definition, to have the greatest impact of the three types of modifications, because it deletes a whole part (a panel) of the original breakdown. While the vertical croppings and horizontal extensions were motivated by the urge to construct full tiers that matched the page design of the Swedish comics magazine, this motivation can hardly account for the deletion of panels. Here, another reason must be the case—one not mentioned in the testimonial of former Semic editor Janne Lundström (see Storn). Each issue of *Agent X9* had a fixed number

of pages (in this case, 98 pages), so the instalments of the various series had to fit within this number chosen by the Swedish publisher. In the issue under scrutiny, next to "Modesty Blaise" there were instalments of three other detective series from the daily press ("Rip Kirby", "Buck Ryan", and "Paul Temple"). It would appear that the total number of pages required to publish the four instalments in their entirety surpassed the fixed number of pages available in an issue of *Agent X9*. Although I have not been able to check the other comic strips for deletions of panels because I have no access to their original versions, it is plausible to link the deletion of panels from the original British "Modesty Blaise" comic strip to this page constraint imposed by the Swedish publication format.

It is intriguing that the deletions occur predominantly near the beginning and towards the end of the 114-tier episode "La Machine". The deletions concern often just a single panel; rather exceptionally two or more consecutive panels are affected (like the final seven panels of the episode). Table 4 briefly analyses all fifteen deleted panels.

### Conclusion and Final Remarks

WHILE publishers in France and the Netherlands used for their translations of *Modesty Blaise* their usual album formats, Swedish publisher Semic chose a publication format that at the time seemed the most appropriate for the country—namely, their usual format of *serietidning* comics publishing.<sup>5</sup> The ironical paradox is that the Swedish "domestication" of a British daily strip was carried out through the use of an originally foreign publication format that has its roots in North America. The US-American comic book format became, with some modifications, a popular way of consuming graphic narratives in Sweden. As we have seen, the Swedish comics magazine *Agent X9* differs nevertheless on various accounts from the typical US model.

The problem for the adaptation of a daily strip was that, from the start, the publication format was ill-suited to the task. As a consequence, more or less invasive formal modifications were necessary. Firstly, a story that was originally made to be consumed at the rhythm of one strip a day, six days a week, over the course of nineteen weeks in a daily newspaper, is offered to the Swedish reader

---

<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Swedish adaptation, the Dutch album edition by Panda (called *Miranda Blaise*, 1980–86) and the French one by Hachette (1975, 1981, 1983) did not need to recompose the strips because the albums had a larger format than the Swedish comics magazine. This allowed the tiers to be published nearly identically to the original strips in the dailies. There were only some minor modifications: the Dutch edition deleted the title text (of the top left); the French erased the repetitive title only in the third album. The French edition incorporated even the big mention of the copyright holder for France, Opera Mundi, which was also used in the previous publications in the French press. The fact that the French only published three volumes is an indication that this series was not very popular among Francophone consumers. Later, from 1993 to 1999, another Swedish publisher, Alvgång, compiled "Modesty Blaise" in book format. The large format (215 x 295 mm) made it possible to publish the original tiers (five per page) without modifying the panels. The first story, "Mordligan", was published in the first volume (O'Donnell and Holdaway, "Mordligan").

UK version		Description of the deleted panel(s) and discussion
Tier	Deleted panel(s)	
1	1st, 3rd	(See fig 3.) Information-wise, only a larger view of the surroundings of the apartment is lost. The crucial textual information is incorporated in the extended version of the first Swedish panel, but the two text boxes are melted into one, and a dialogue balloon (with an extra reply) of the second panel has been left out. This balloon starts a new dialogue that continues in the third panel, which has been deleted. Here some crucial information to situate the character of Modesty is lost, because references are made to her illegal affairs (“protection rackets”). In the Swedish version there is, consequently, no information about the peculiarities of the protagonist. Maybe the Swedish adaptors thought they could leave out this information, because this was not the first story of Modesty Blaise (MB) <sup>6</sup> that was published. The readers could already have been aware of the title character’s characteristics and back story. This was not the case, however, when MB started in the British newspapers, as this was the very first story and the character therefore needed some introduction.
11	2nd	(See fig 3.) A top shot of MB on her terrace, who is responding somewhat laconically about her defunct husband. Some background details about her life are dropped by this omission.
28	3rd	MB says that she “must get limbered up myself if we’re going back into the business”. This additional information is helpful to understand her physical condition.
33	2nd	Fraser is wondering about the name of Modesty. This is not particularly crucial to be able to follow the main narration but is an interesting sidestep that is erased.
105	1st, 2nd	(See fig. 2.) This is a loss for the suspense of the narration about the final battle, because we see the villain keeping on threatening Garvin and MB. The other deleted panel is wordless, we just see a changed expression on the face of the bald character—he seems surprised—and in the foreground MB, who is clearly not terrified, but somewhat expressionless. The Swedish version jumps immediately to the close-up with the accompanying text box, explaining how she shot the villain with a concealed gun (a pen-gun) under her bandages. This omission is perhaps the most questionable of all the deletions.
111	1st	The aftermath of the clash: MB needs time to unwind with her friend Willie; she is crying. This follows on from the two preceding panels, where overlapping information is given. Here no crucial loss of information occurs.
112	3rd	Gerald Tarrant asks Modesty about the violence she had to endure. This scene gives the impression that he really cares about her.
113	All	Gerald Tarrant asks how he can make a payment to Willie Garvin. MB responds that Willie only works for her. Information that stresses the special bond between Willie and Modesty is lost in the deletion of the tier.
114	All	Gerald Tarrant says that in the future he may need her collaboration again, she responds that she will. This incites the reader to expect new, other exciting stories. This is lost by suppressing the complete tier.

Table 4. Overview and discussion of the deleted panels in the Swedish version.

as a whole, in a single delivery. This provokes a completely different reading experience. Secondly, the adaptation involved a number of formal modifications, both on the level of the verbal text and on the level of the pictures. The Swedish design of the verbal text is less refined than that of the original British version. While, quantitatively speaking, most of the original drawings remained untouched, one third of panels were nevertheless cropped or enlarged, thus changing the original composition of these panels. The number of completely deleted panels is relatively low, but impacted on the narration and the reader’s experience.

<sup>6</sup> I use the abbreviation “MB” here indistinctly to refer to the title and to the title character.

To what extent these modifications fall under the legal category of derogatory treatment of the artists' moral rights remains open for debate. In retrospect, the editor at Semic at the time, Janne Lundström, now considers such modifications of the original work as an infringement of the authors' rights, but at that time he and his colleagues at Semic did not care much (Storn 193). It is unknown how the artists or their syndicate considered those Swedish adaptations by Semic, nor what the translation contracts stipulated. What is known is that Semic sent copies of their adaptations to the writer, and it is likely that he would have shown at least the first copy to the artist. Since this practice continued over many years, one might suppose that the authors preferred such an adaptation over no translation at all. After all, these modifying procedures were widely practised, not only in the translation of comics, but also with format changes within a certain comics culture. In 1988 Gilles Ciment polled several French comic artists about the adaptation of their albums into pocketbooks, which also required a redesign of the page layout. The artists' opinions diverged: some saw it as problematic, others were not concerned.

---

### Works Cited

- Anonymous. "Size Your Comic Books for Proper Storage." *Kipkis*, [URL](#). Accessed 28 May 2021.
- Baetens, Jan, and Pascal Lefèvre. *Pour une lecture moderne de la bande dessinée*. Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée, 1993.
- Chapman, James. "The Extraordinary Career of Modesty Blaise." *Comics and Pop Culture: Adaptation from Panel to Frame*, edited by Barry Keith Grant and Scott Henderson, U of Texas P, 2021, pp. 199–213. *De Gruyter*, doi:[10.7560/319383-015](#).
- Chavanne, Renaud. *Composition de la bande dessinée*. PLG, 2010.
- Ciment, Gilles. "Le pour et le contre." *L'année de la bande dessinée 87–88*, edited by Stan Barets and Thierry Groensteen, Glénat, pp. 98–101.
- Costa, Jordi. "Modesty Blaise de Joseph Losey: La espía que vino del pop / Modesty Blaise by Joseph Losey: The Spy Who Came in From Pop." *Joseph Losey*, edited by Quim Casas and Ana Cristina Iriarte, Festival Internacional de Cine de San Sebastián/Filmoteca Española, 2017, pp. 179–89.
- Couch, N. C. Christopher. "The Publication and Formats of Comics, Graphic Novels, and Tankobon." *Image & Narrative*, vol. 1, no. 1, Dec. 2000, [URL](#).
- Crawford, Hubert H. *Crawford's Encyclopedia of Comic Books*. Jonathan David Publishers, 1978.
- Crossley, Laura. "An Absence of Modesty: The Male/Female Dichotomy in *Modesty Blaise*." *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2018, pp. 357–74. *Edinburgh UP Journals*, doi:[10.3366/jbctv.2018.0427](#).
- De Pauw, Ilke. *Gender, Race and Sexuality in Peter O'Donnell's Modesty Blaise Novels*. 2012. Ghent U, Master's dissertation, [URL](#).
- Gaumer, Patrick. *Larousse de la BD*. Larousse, 2004.



- Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception: Classic Edition*. 1979. Psychology Press, 2014. Taylor & Francis Group, doi:[10.4324/9781315740218](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315740218).
- Goh, Robbie B. H. "Peter O'Donnell, Race Relations and National Identity: The Dynamics of Representation in 1960s and 1970s Britain." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 32, no. 4, Spring 1999, pp. 29–43. Wiley Online Library, doi:[10.1111/j.0022-3840.1999.00029.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1999.00029.x).
- Goulart, Ron. *Over 50 Years of American Comic Books*. Mallard Press, 1991.
- Gravett, Paul, and Peter Stanbury. *Great British Comics*. Aurum, 2006.
- Hegersfors, Sture. "Suède." *Histoire mondiale de la bande dessinée*, edited by Claude Moliterni, Pierre Horay Éditeur, 1980, pp. 146–47.
- Kelleter, Frank. "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality." *Media of Serial Narrative*, edited by Frank Kelleter, Ohio State UP, 2017, pp. 7–34. JSTOR, doi:[10.2307/j.ctv10crd8x.5](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10crd8x.5).
- Landy, Marcia. *Swinging Femininity: 1960s Transnational Style*. Routledge, 2009.
- Lefèvre, Pascal. "An Empirical Study of the Publication Format and Beginnings in the Belgian Francophone Weeklies, Spirou and Tintin, in the 1950s." *Closure: Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 47–67.
- . "The Importance of Being 'Published': A Comparative Study of Different Comics Formats." *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, edited by Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000, pp. 91–105.
- . "Narration in the Flemish Dual Publication System: The Crossover Genre of the Humoristic Adventure." *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, edited by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon, De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 255–69, [URL](#).
- . "Newspaper strips." *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, edited by Frank Bramlett et al., 2017, pp. 16–24.
- Mauritzon, Peder, and Chatrin Mauritzon. *Stora boken om Modesty Blaise*. Serieförämrjandet, 2003.
- Miller, Toby. *Spyscreen: Espionage on Film and TV from the 1930s to the 1960s*. Oxford UP, 2003.
- Moliterni, Claude, et al. *BD guide: Encyclopédie de la bande dessinée internationale*. Omnibus, 2003.
- Morgan, Harry. "Bas-résille, bons à rien, et cousins étrangers: La bande dessinée quotidienne en Europe." *Maîtres de la bande dessinée européenne*, edited by Thierry Groensteen, Bibliothèque Nationale de France/Seuil, 2000, pp. 80–93.
- O'Donnell, Peter, and Jim Holdaway. "La Machine". *Modesty Blaise: The Gabriel Set-Up*, Titan Books, 2004.
- . "Modesty Blaise: Mordligan." *Agent X9*, no. 1, 1978, pp. 45–82.
- . "Mordligan." *Modesty Blaise*, vol. 1, Alvgilans, 1983, pp. 24–46.
- Rodgers, Diane A. "Swinging Sixties Spies in Comic Book Guise! Fathom and Modesty Blaise." *Cinema Retro*, no. 44, 2019, pp. 18–25. Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive, [URL](#).

- Rota, Valerio. "Aspects of Adaptation: The Translation of Comics Formats." *Comics in Translation*, edited by Federico Zanettin, Routledge, 2015, pp. 79–98.
- Sell, Cathy. "Manga Translation and Interculture." *Mechademia*, vol. 6, 2011, pp. 93–108. *Project Muse*, doi:[10.1353/mec.2011.0002](https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.2011.0002).
- Storn, Thomas. "Janne Lundström: Mer än bara serier." *Svensk Seriehistoria: Tredje boken från Svenskt Seriearkiv*, edited by Ulf Grandberg, Seriefrämjandet, 2019, pp. 182–233.
- Strömberg, Fredrik. *Swedish Comics History*. Swedish Comics Association, 2010.
- Walker, Brian. *The Comics: The Complete Collection*. Abrams Comicarts, 2011.
- White, Rosie. *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2007. *Taylor & Francis Group*, doi:[10.4324/9780203030578](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203030578).
- Zanettin, Federico, editor. *Comics in Translation*. 2008. Routledge, 2015. *Taylor & Francis Group*, doi:[10.4324/9781315759685](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315759685).
- . "Visual Adaptation in Translated Comics." *Intralinea*, vol. 16, 2014, [URL](#).
- 

I would like to thank Tilmann Altenberg, Bill Gardiner, Alun Michael, Fredrik Strömberg, Germund von Wowern, the library of Sint-Lukas Brussels (LUCA School of Arts), and the *Facebook* group "Seriefrämjandets Tankebubbla—Thought bubble".