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## The Role of Intersemiotic Elements in Song Translation: A Case Study of *Coin-Operated Boy*, Performed by The Dresden Dolls\*

**Abstract:** This paper analyses the role of intersemiotic elements in song translation, using the Polish translation of *Coin-Operated Boy* by The Dresden Dolls as an example. The purpose is to present the process of reconstructing the meaning of a song using the non-verbal semiotic codes of the music, the performative layer, the visual aspects and the cultural context. Such multimodal carriers of meaning seem of particular importance in alternative music. This is certainly true in the case of punk cabaret, a genre that utilises the idiosyncratic aesthetics of the neo-Victorian style, circus, burlesque, and cabaret, where the performative level seems no less important than the lyrics and the music. The textual layer of the song under discussion finds its counterpart in the music and the official video clip. The paper presents how these elements direct the translator towards the chosen linguistic solutions.

**Keywords:** song translation, intersemiotic, punk cabaret, The Dresden Dolls, Amanda Palmer.

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of intersemiotic, non-verbal elements in contemporary song translation, using as an example the Polish

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translation of the song *Coin-Operated Boy*<sup>1</sup> performed by the punk-cabaret band The Dresden Dolls.<sup>2</sup> Its main hypothesis is that the extratextual elements of a song, such as the music, performance, visual aspects of the video clip, variations introduced during live concerts, and the broader cultural context of genre conventions, all contribute to the overall meaning and style of the song, and may inform the translator in the process of creating the target text.

The song is understood here, as is the predominant approach in contemporary song translation studies, as a work comprising several semiotic codes. Klaus Kaindl calls popular music a “mediated multiple text” of a plurisemiotic nature.<sup>3</sup> Johan Franzon defines the song as “a piece of music and lyrics [...] designed for a singing performance”,<sup>4</sup> thus underlining its triform character, encompassing the text, the music, and the (actual or potential) performance. This last sphere seems of particular relevance in the case of The Dresden Dolls’ work, which, as discussed below, is marked by a specific theatricality and distinct performative style. It is worth adding a fourth level here, namely, that of context, understood as external elements of the “situational information”<sup>5</sup> surrounding the song. No song, be it in translation or not, ever exists in a cultural vacuum, and such factors as cultural conventions, recipients’ expectations, and ideologies may also contribute to its understanding.

Additional intersemiotic material is available in the case of songs which, like *Coin-Operated Boy*, are accompanied by a video clip. Kaindl underlines the functional interrelation of all the semiotic codes in a video, where “the visual aspect is interlinked not only with the musical but also with the verbal code”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a video becomes a supplementary reference point for a translator.

Considering this plurisemiotic nature of any song, especially when supplemented with a video clip, it becomes evident that song translation ex-

<sup>1</sup> Amanda Palmer (lyrics, music), “Coin-Operated Boy,” *The Dresden Dolls*, 8ft. Records, 2003, CD.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Mach, “Au-tomatyczny pan” (translation of Palmer 2003), 2022 (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>3</sup> Klaus Kaindl, “The plurisemiotics of pop song translation: words, music, voice and image,” in *Song and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation*, ed. Dinda L. Gorrée (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2005), 241, 244, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401201544\\_009](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401201544_009).

<sup>4</sup> Johan Franzon, “Choices in Song Translation. Singability in Print, Subtitles and Sung Performance,” *The Translator*, vol. 14 no. 2 (2008): 376, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2008.10799263>.

<sup>5</sup> Annjo K. Greenall et al., “Making a case for a descriptive-explanatory approach to song translation research: Concepts, trends and models,” in *Song Translation. Lyrics in Contexts*, eds. Johan Franzon, Annjo K. Greenall, Sigmund Kvam, and Anastasia Parianou (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2021), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Kaindl, “The plurisemiotics of pop song translation: words, music, voice and image,” 252.

ceeds the framework of typical interlingual translation in Roman Jakobson's classification.<sup>7</sup> Using terminology proposed by Marta Kaźmierczak, it may be considered an act of interlingual translation in the process of which other semiotic layers should be taken into account.<sup>8</sup> This paper is meant precisely as a case study of how these semiotic layers are indeed taken into account in translational practice.

Every singable song translation is, obviously, governed by the overarching aim of making the target lyrics fit the music, of "the attainment of musico-verbal unity between the text and the composition".<sup>9</sup> Thus, the entirety of the original music, with its melody and metre, forms the main, most general intersemiotic factor affecting the process and product of song translation. However, rather than analysing the overall conformity of the target text to the music of *Coin-Operated Boy*, the considerations in this paper focus instead on selected translational decisions which have been deemed particularly interesting from the intersemiotic perspective.

I should also add that this paper is intended to constitute a descriptive-explanatory study<sup>10</sup> of the processes taking place during the translation, of their rationale, and of their purposes. I believe that this approach offers the most potential in song translation studies (not to mention that a prescriptive approach when discussing one's own translation risks fostering inappropriate complacency). To quote Šebnem Susam-Sarajeva, the questions that this paper attempts to answer are "What kind of translation strategies, choices and decisions are adopted? And most importantly, why?".<sup>11</sup> In other words: what kind of specific translational choices were inspired by the intersemiotic elements, why, and how?

## The Dresden Dolls and Their 'Brechtian Punk Cabaret'

The Dresden Dolls are a duo hailing originally from Boston, consisting of Amanda Palmer (singer, songwriter, pianist) and Brian Viglione (drummer).

<sup>7</sup> Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 114.

<sup>8</sup> Marta Kaźmierczak, "From Intersemiotic Translation to Intersemiotic Aspects of Translation," *Przekładaniec* (Special issue 2018): 26, <https://doi.org/10.4467/16891864ePC.18.009.9831>.

<sup>9</sup> Franzon, "Choices in Song Translation. Singability in Print, Subtitles and Sung Performance," 375.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this term see Greenall et al., "Making a case for a descriptive-explanatory approach to song translation research: Concepts, trends and models," 28–33.

<sup>11</sup> Šebnem Susam-Sarajeva, "Translation and Music: Changing Perspectives, Frameworks and Significance," *The Translator* 14, no. 2 (2008): 195, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2008.10799255>.

The band formed in 2000, issued three studio albums, and was active until 2008, when it split following the growth of Palmer's solo career. Nonetheless, the band members remained on friendly terms and have given numerous live shows since 2008, with the recent reunion in 2022 resulting in extensive touring around the United States and in plans for a new album.<sup>12</sup>

It was Palmer who coined the term 'Brechtian punk cabaret' to describe the band's music. Although her intention was simply to avoid being labelled 'goth',<sup>13</sup> this expression seems to aptly capture the key elements of The Dresden Dolls' musical and performative qualities. The punk element is reflected in the group's musical intensity and a certain rawness of sound, with dynamic, oftentimes aggressive vocals and drum solos. The references to Weimar-era cabaret may be traced, in turn, in the theatricality of the performance, and a penchant for a certain alienating artificiality. Furthermore, the ironic distance and the omnipresent streak of black humour hail back to both those sources of inspiration.<sup>14</sup>

Besides that, the band's idiosyncratic aesthetics include references to the circus and the burlesque, with white mime makeup, Palmer clad in corsets and black-and-white striped stockings, and Viglione in a bowler hat. This funfair atmosphere is further enhanced during their live shows, which are usually accompanied by the so-called Dresden Dolls Brigade: an impromptu ensemble of burlesque dancers, circus artists, fire eaters, magicians, and other performers. Altogether, this builds the ambience of an immersive art experience, far exceeding the usual format of a live concert.<sup>15</sup> Such a strong stress on performative aspects suggests that extratextual factors may play a particularly important role in the semantics of the duo's songs, as will be analysed for the case of *Coin-Operated Boy*.

### ***Coin-Operated Boy* and Its Semiotic Levels**

*Coin-Operated Boy* appeared on The Dresden Dolls' first, self-titled album and remains one of the band's most popular songs, performed live to this

<sup>12</sup> Amanda Palmer, "The State of All Things: End of Year Edition 2023" [blog entry], December 31, 2023, *Patreon*, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/state-of-all-end-94946056>.

<sup>13</sup> Debbie Speer, "The Dresden Dolls," *Pollstar.com*, April 3, 2006, <https://www.pollstar.com/article/the-dresden-dolls-50517>.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the characterisation of punk cabaret see Anna Mach, "What Is Punk Cabaret? An Attempt to Define and Exemplify the Phenomenon," *Zagadnienia rodzajów literackich* 4 (2020): 151–166, <https://doi.org/10.26485/ZRL/2020/63.4/10>.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ryan McKittrick, "Ryan McKittrick introduces The Dresden Dolls," *American Repertory Theater ARTicles*, vol. 5 i.2bc (December, 2006), <https://americanrepertorytheater.org/media/articles-vol-5-i-2bc-living-dolls/>.

day, with its easily recognisable opening piano riff cheered by the audience.<sup>16</sup> The lyrics form a first-person narrative by a female protagonist, ostensibly praising her artificial, “coin-operated” boyfriend, allowing her to enjoy a romantic relationship without having to endure all the complications of real life. Soon, it becomes evident that the narrator is in fact afraid of intimacy, and that the exultation over the automatic partner is a thinly-veiled complaint about her actual loneliness and inability to maintain an authentic relationship.

The musical layer illustrates the lyrics: the accompaniment on drums and electric piano seems as mechanical as the eponymous boyfriend. The repetitive tune resembles that of a barrel-organ or a music box, with a strong musical stress forcing certain modifications in the vocal delivery of the lyrics (such as displacements in the word stress or words interrupted by a musical pause). As will be discussed later, the rhythmic pattern is broken at several crucial points, creating an impression of a faltering barrel organ or a broken record, in line with a shift in tone, from ecstatic to sombre, in the lyrics.

Similar iconicity may be noticed in the official video.<sup>17</sup> The band members are cast as the protagonists of the song, with Palmer in the role of the singing narrator, praising her coin-operated boy, and Viglione as the said automaton at its most charming and courteous. The visuals closely follow the lyrics, providing illustration to Palmer’s vocals. Yet the aesthetics of a kitschy, candy-coloured bucolic, with frilly costumes and artificial lighting, as well as the exaggerated theatricality of the performance, make one wary of taking the verbal message at face value; something is obviously too good to be true. And indeed, one of the key lyrical and musical twists, discussed in greater detail later in this paper, comes with a metatextual bridge describing the singing persona’s plight. The real world abruptly enters the sphere of fantasies, in the lyrics and music, but also in the video.

For the sake of accuracy, it should be noted here that the video includes a modified version of the song, with shortened lyrics, omitting one full stanza (lines 13–16; the full source and target texts are included in Appendix 1) and, less crucially, a repetition in lines 24–25. Wherever deemed necessary, the discrepancies between the two versions are covered below.

The three above-mentioned semiotic layers of *Coin-Operated Boy* can also be supplemented by another, external one – that of contextualising it

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. The Dresden Dolls, “Coin-Operated Boy” (live in Berkeley 2024), accessed March 14, 2024, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7Ovi6Rc-aQ>.

<sup>17</sup> Amanda Palmer (lyrics, music), and Michael Pope (dir.), “Coin-Operated Boy” (performed by The Dresden Dolls; official video), 2004, accessed March 12, 2024, *IMVDb*, <https://imvdb.com/video/the-dresden-dolls/coin-operated-boy>.

within the wider scope of cultural tradition. Here, the references to old-style cabaret seem quite evident, especially in the visual image of the artists. Palmer, with her arched, artificial eyebrows, dark-red lipstick, and risqué outfit of a satin corset and striped stockings, and Viglione, in a tuxedo and a bowler hat (which he, as an ultimate – if coin-operated – gentleman, keeps on even in bed), unfurl their protagonists' melodrama in retro interiors. The music follows this convention with its somewhat old-fashioned main piano tune and Palmer's vocals, unusually mellow and stylised in comparison to her typical raw singing style.

As can be seen from this very brief outline of the semiotic codes, the semantics of *Coin-Operated Boy* is not limited to the level of lyrics only. The song translator may rely on numerous multimodal elements while working on the target text. Below is an outline of the particular translational choices resulting from such extratextual elements: musical, visual, performative, and contextual.

### **(In)congruous Enjambment: Translation and Musical Metre**

Usually in the craft of song-translation, the crucial element of the song is its 'catchphrase', or the most noticeable expression, which usually appears in the title. Indeed, in the case of this song this is the phrase "coin-operated boy", and the first challenge in producing a functional translation is to find a metrically suitable equivalent for it. It is worth noting that the musical metre dictates a pause between each "coin" and "operated", thus imposing a very prominent enjambment in numerous positions in the lyrics.

Enjambment, while an expressive stylistic tool in poetry, poses certain risks in songwriting and, consequently, in song translation. A musical pause dividing a semantically linked phrase – or, even more so, a single word – may disrupt the reception of the lyrics. As Ronnie Apter and Mark Herman put it, "when verbal and musical structures conflict, the effect is much stronger than caused by enjambment in spoken verse".<sup>18</sup> Additionally, unlike a poem, which in modern times is meant predominantly for reading, a song is delivered "line by line" and the audience is unable to find out the content of the next line until it is actually performed. An enjambment may therefore obliterate the sense of the lyrics, and in some cases even cause an unintentional humorous effect.<sup>19</sup> It could, therefore, be tempting to avoid it in translation.

<sup>18</sup> Ronnie Apter, and Mark Herman, *Translating for Singing: The Theory and Craft of Translating Lyrics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 198.

<sup>19</sup> For examples see Marta Kaźmierczak, "Przekład meliczny" [Song Translation], in *Sensualność w literaturze polskiej. Przedstawienia zmysłów człowieka w języku, piśmiennictwie i sztuce*

Yet, and here I am quoting Apter and Herman again, “if the clash of musical and verbal is a significant feature of the work, translators should preserve it”.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the strong stress on the first syllable, followed by a pause which interrupts the compound adjective “coin-operated”, can be seen as such a “significant feature” of the song. Its effect is musical iconicity, where the music (and the resulting shift in the delivery of lyrics) emphasises the mechanical, and at times faltering, nature of the eponymous character. This impression is deepened by the strong *staccato* of Palmer’s piano, in rhythmic unison with Viglione’s drums.<sup>21</sup>

Following the cue of the music, not only does my translation maintain the enjambment, it even deepens it by replacing the original catchphrase with the expression *automatyczny pan* (‘automatic mister’ or ‘gentleman’, as discussed later), with an enjambment appearing mid-word: *au- / tomatyczny* (it may be added that the initial, stressed syllable *au* is also an onomatopoeic word denoting a cry of pain in Polish, which – depending on the vocal interpretation – may allow a potential performer to use it with either humorous or dramatic results). The same idea of amplifying the effect of the enjambment is used in the case of a similarly accentuated phrase “with a pretty coin / operated voice” (lines 76–77), replaced with *nie zadaje e- / mocjonalnych ran* (‘doesn’t inflict emotional wounds’), with a pause again appearing mid-word. The assumed effect is to disturb the natural verbal stress pattern for the sake of strengthening the aural impression of automatonlike music.

Usually, such a translational decision would seem out of place, but here it is introduced as the deliberate choice of an irregular linguistic means that amplifies the effect created in the source material by “the clash of musical and verbal”. Thus, the target text was shaped not only by the source lyrics, but by the intersemiotic element of music.

## **A Broken Record, a Broken Heart: Looped Sequences and Their Translation**

As already hinted, not everything in the – ostensibly perfect – relationship with the coin-operated boy seems to be going smoothly. The discord is signalled largely on the non-verbal level. Quite early in the song,<sup>22</sup> and in its

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*od średniowiecza do współczesności* [Sensuality in Polish Literature. Representations of the Human Senses in Language, Writing and Art from the Middle Ages to the Present Day], ed. ed. Włodzimierz Bolecki (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2012/2015).

<sup>20</sup> Apter, and Herman, *Translating for Singing*, 207.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Palmer (lyrics, music), and “Coin-Operated Boy,” 2:14–2:24.

<sup>22</sup> Palmer (lyrics, music), “Coin-Operated Boy,” 1:24–1:33.

video,<sup>23</sup> the music, the vocals, and the image are styled to appear somehow disrupted, and the same short fragment is repeated several times, as if the record and the film reel were broken. The music and vocal line sound unnaturally interrupted, which is coordinated with the image, where cleverly applied cuts form an impression of the dancing couple repeating the same movement over and over again, as if stuck in an indecisive moment of their relationship.

What is symptomatic is the fragment of the lyrics that becomes looped. The “glitch” appears near the end of line 22, which reads “And I’ll never let him go”, and continues until the end of line 23 (“And I’ll never be alone”). As a result, the repeated phrase forms a contradictory statement: “Go! / And I’ll never be alone”, as if the singing persona were torn between two opposing desires: that of welcoming a partner into her life in order to avoid loneliness and that of getting rid of him to avoid any serious attachment. This is much clearer in the album version, in which – unlike in the shorter rendition accompanying the video clip – this fragment is preceded by a stanza where the female protagonist indirectly admits that her “coin-operated boy” is a make-believe partner and that she spends her nights crying (lines 15–16). As a result, the looped part with its contradiction becomes a pivotal moment, allowing the recipient to understand that this song is at least as sad as it is funny, and that what is broken here is not only the record, but also the heroine’s heart.

As a result of this combined musical and visual effect of the loop, maintaining the contradiction between the last word of line 22 and the statement in line 23 may infuse the target text with a similar semantic value. In my translation, the chosen phrasing of these lines is: *Nigdy mu nie powiem “Precz”! / I nie będę sama już* (‘I will never tell him “Go away!” / And I won’t be alone anymore’). Placing the word *precz* (in this context: ‘go away’ or ‘be gone’) in the final position of line 22 allows for a similar contradictory effect in the repeated phrase. Without the plurisemiotic signals on the musical and visual level, the crucial character of the original “go” at the end of line 22 could easily be overlooked. Yet again, the translational choice is crucially informed by the intersemiotic elements.

### **The Colours of Reality and Fantasy: Visual and Aural Signals of Emotions**

As already briefly mentioned, one of the key turning points in the song’s musical and visual code comes with the bridge (lines 36–63), which consti-

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<sup>23</sup> Palmer (lyrics, music), and Pope (dir.), “Coin-Operated Boy,” 0:57–1:06.



tutes about one-third of the song<sup>24</sup> and of the video.<sup>25</sup> In the video clip, it begins with the colour palette suddenly changing from vivid, candy hues to black-and-white. Palmer's face, without the theatrical makeup from just seconds ago, fills almost the whole frame. She is pressing her hands to the eyes, as if exhausted or disappointed. The mood of her vocals also changes – from playful and flirtatious to more and more desperate. Viglione, now in a casual outfit of shorts and a T-shirt instead of a fanciful tuxedo or silk pyjamas, is shown angrily leaving the room, as if he were the actual boyfriend whose demeanour was the reason for conjuring up the coin-operated one. The music gradually becomes grim and raw, the gleeful signature automatonlike tune is replaced by a wall of noise of almost punk-rock character.

All this builds an audiovisual illustration of the protagonist's emotional turmoil when faced with the embittered realisation of the trials and tribulations that occur in real-life relationships, those "complications galore" of love. At the end of the bridge, however, the colours gradually become saturated again, with the final line "[I want a] coin-operated boy" (line 63) bringing back the vibrant colour palette and the main piano theme. The heroine is safely cocooned in her glossy "plastic fantasy" again.

On the level of lyrics, this section of the song is introduced by a metatextual comment: "this bridge was written / to make you feel smittener [sic]" (lines 36–37). The singing persona then shows her actual face, that of "a girl getting bitterer" who tests her partner's patience by rejecting him and still half-wishing him to stay by her side (lines 44–51). The sobering effect of the text is, as described above, noticeably strengthened on the intersemiotic level. My rendition of the target text was clearly affected by this multimodal amplification. This can be illustrated by the Polish version of lines 44–47, where the original phrase "Will you persist / even after I bet you / a billion dollars / that I'll never love you" becomes *czy się nie poddasz / gdy wprost w twarz ci krzyknę, / że nigdy przenigdy / nie będę cię kochać* ('will you not give up if I yell right into your face that I will never ever love you'). The element of yelling something right into the interlocutor's face or the amplified "never ever" (*nigdy przenigdy*) do not appear here for the sake of rhyme or rhythm; their use stems directly from the strong emotional load of the music and image rather than from the source lyrics. Again, it is the non-verbal semiotic code that influences the translational choices.

<sup>24</sup> Palmer (lyrics, music), "Coin-Operated Boy," 1:38–3:14.

<sup>25</sup> Palmer (lyrics, music), and Pope (dir.), "Coin-Operated Boy," 1:11–2:28.

## Boy, Man, or Mister: Translation and the Genre Convention

This section aims to present how song translators may rely on multi-modal factors which are external to the song itself. In this case, such a factor is the cultural context and the genre convention to which both the original and the translation refer.

As already indicated, the target text uses the phrase *automatyczny pan* in place of the titular “coin-operated boy”. While the word *automatyczny* (‘automatic’) does not seem to require any comment, the term *pan* may prove more problematic. This expression does not have a single equivalent in English. Polish-English dictionaries render it as ‘gentleman’, ‘master’, ‘lord’, or ‘mister’, depending on the context.<sup>26</sup> A more precise definition may be gleaned from the Polish dictionary, where its two main meanings are ‘a man’ and ‘an official polite form used to address a man or to refer to him’.<sup>27</sup> As explained by Mikołaj Gliński for the sake of English speakers, “*pan* (and its feminine version *pani*) is the most important element of the Polish honorific system. Used in addressing people, and variously translated into English as ‘sir’, ‘mister’, or sometimes simply ‘you’, *pan* remains one of the most characteristic words in the Polish language”.<sup>28</sup> Summing up, *pan* is undoubtedly more formal than ‘boy’ or even ‘man’. Why, then, did it find its way into this translation? The simple answer could be that it is a one-syllable word, allowing the translation to maintain the original masculine rhyming pattern in numerous positions in the song. However, I would like to argue that the main rationale lies elsewhere, namely, in the genre convention of the target culture.

As already discussed above, *Coin-Operated Boy* includes numerous allusions to retro cabaret, particularly in the video clip: from the ornamental lettering of the opening titles, decorated with a sprig of morning glory like a schoolgirl’s diary, through costumes and interior design, to the musical and vocal styling. This element is less evident in the lyrics: there are only slight signals of old-fashioned sentimentalism, as in lines 11–12 (“Who could ever, ever ask for more? / Love without complications galore”). Consequently, most of the vintage aesthetic is discernible on the non-verbal semiotic level. This is not to claim that the song consistently maintains the cabaret ambience and that it constitutes a pastiche – it could rather be described as an

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Cambridge Dictionary*, [entry:] *pan*, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/>.

<sup>27</sup> *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, [entry:] *pan*, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://sjp.pwn.pl> [trans. – A.M.].

<sup>28</sup> Mikołaj Gliński, “Pan – Poland Word by Word,” *Culture.pl*, last updated March 26, 2024, <https://culture.pl/en/article/pan-poland-word-by-word>.

intertextual “wink” at the recipients, suggesting a certain game with the genre convention.

My idea behind using the word *pan* to describe the source-text “boy” follows the same idea; it is meant as a reference to old-fashioned cabaret with its “ladies” and “gentlemen”. Examples of using the formal address *pan* and *pani* instead of a simple *ty* (‘you’) in Polish cabaret (and similar) songs abound. To name just a few: “Czy pani tańczy twista”<sup>29</sup> (‘Do you dance the twist, madame’; all translations in this section A.M.), “Już kąpiesz się nie dla mnie”<sup>30</sup> (‘You know longer bathe for me’) (with its phrase *wiem, że czeka, aż wyschniesz, już inny pan* – ‘I know another gentleman is waiting for you to dry’), “Nie pożałuje pan”<sup>31</sup> (‘You won’t regret it, sir’), “Jesienny pan”<sup>32</sup> (‘An autumnal gentleman’), and “Ja dla pana czasu nie mam”<sup>33</sup> (‘I don’t have time for you, mister’). As may be noted, many of these songs were written by Jeremi Przybora and Jerzy Wasowski, the creators and hosts of *Kabaret Starszych Panów*<sup>34</sup> (‘The Elderly Gentlemen’s Cabaret’), a Polish cabaret revue of immense fame and cultural influence, an obvious reference point for the Polish cabaret song.

The target text follows the stylistics of using *pan* (or its feminine equivalent, *pani*) to refer to the eponymous protagonist, but also to other persons. In lines 36–37, the narrator states: *teraz gram przejście o pani po przejściach* (‘I am now playing a bridge about a lady with a past’; the pun here is on the word *przejście*, which may mean both ‘a musical bridge’ and ‘a past, difficult experience’). Line 66 mentions *panów z krwi i kości nie chcę znać* (‘gentlemen of flesh and blood I don’t wish to know’) and in lines 69–70 the narrator claims that the eponymous character ‘may not have known many other ladies’ (*nie znał może zbyt wielu innych pań*). The only passage of the target

<sup>29</sup> Andrzej Tylczyński (lyrics), and Wojciech Piętowski (music), “Czy pani tańczy twista” (performed by Violetta Villas and Tadeusz Woźniakowski), Violetta Villas & Tadeusz Woźniakowski, *Czy pani tańczy twista* (Pronit, 1962), EP.

<sup>30</sup> Jeremi Przybora (lyrics), and Jerzy Wasowski (music), “Już kąpiesz się nie dla mnie” (performed by Kalina Jędrusik and Wiesław Michnikowski), *Kabaret Starszych Panów, Piosenki wybrane* (Polskie Nagrania Muza, 1962), LP.

<sup>31</sup> Jeremi Przybora (lyrics), and Jerzy Wasowski (music), “Nie pożałuje pan” (performed by Kalina Jędrusik). *Kabaret Starszych Panów, Wizyta starszych panów* (Polskie Nagrania Muza, 1970), LP.

<sup>32</sup> Wojciech Młynarski (lyrics), and Roman Orłow (music), “Jesienny pan” (performed by Krystyna Konarska), Krystyna Konarska, *Jesienny Pan* (Polskie Nagrania Muza, 1963), single.

<sup>33</sup> Jeremi Przybora (lyrics), and Jerzy Wasowski (music), “Ja dla pana czasu nie mam” (performed by Hanna Banaszak), in Hanna Banaszak, *Hanna Banaszak* (Frisco Sound, 1991), CD.

<sup>34</sup> Note the presence of *pan* again, in the cabaret’s name.

text where the singing persona changes the form of address to simple, informal 'you' (*ty*) is the bridge (lines 40–51). As already discussed above, in that part the gaudy façade of the “plastic fantasy” crumbles and the hardships of real life become transiently visible, making the use of *pan* too fanciful and inappropriate.

## Live and Uncut: the Role of Concert Variants in Translation

Towards the end of the video clip, we can see a somewhat confusing scene.<sup>35</sup> The heroine, played by Palmer, claims that she “can even take him [her artificial boyfriend] in the bath” (line 67), ostensibly advertising his waterproof qualities. Indeed, we see the couple in the bathroom, with Viglione holding a rubber duck and wearing an exaggerated pink shower cap (on top of his bowler hat, of course). Yet something in the image seems disturbing: Palmer, with a large bath brush in her hand, approaches Viglione and makes a movement suggesting poking him from behind. We see the coin-operated boy's surprised grimace and hear a squeak of the duck toy. A sexual innuendo is evident, although nothing suggests it on the textual level. Nothing, that is to say, if we only refer to the studio version of the song.

Things are quite different during live performances. It turns out that the line in question is a polite, self-censored replacement of another, far more explicit version, performed regularly during live shows by The Dresden Dolls or by Palmer playing solo. That line goes: “I can even fuck him in the ass”.<sup>36</sup> The gesture made with the bath brush suddenly makes more sense.

The translator may of course choose to ignore this variation in the lyrics, focussing on the studio version only. Nonetheless, it should not be overlooked that the live version enriches the punk-cabaret nature of the song. The switch of the traditional male-female sexual roles may be viewed as a signal of a general reversal of established hierarchies, forming an instance of carnivalisation in the sense described by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>37</sup> It can be

<sup>35</sup> Palmer (lyrics, music), and Pope (dir.), “Coin-Operated Boy,” 2:50–2:55.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. The Dresden Dolls, “Coin-Operated Boy” (live in Sydney 2012), accessed March 26, 2024, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EYvLNsdChI>, 5:45; The Dresden Dolls, “Coin-Operated Boy” (live in Woodstock 2022), accessed March 26, 2024, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2h1YRBiqsC4>, 7:29; The Dresden Dolls, “Coin-Operated Boy” (live in Berkeley 2024), accessed March 14, 2024, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7Ovi6Rc-aQ>, 4:55; Amanda Palmer, “Coin-Operated Boy” (live in Zurich 2012), accessed March 26, 2024, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P2nVplGdDg>, 5:47.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 122–137.

added that the carnivalistic feature of this line is also manifest in its focus on the bodily “lower stratum”.<sup>38</sup> This strengthens the subversive potential of the song and fits into the larger image of punk cabaret.<sup>39</sup>

For these reasons, my translation provides for a slight variation to be sung live, if chosen by potential performers. The line *mogę nawet go do wanny brać* (‘I can even take him to the bathtub’; line 67) becomes *mogę nawet go od tyłu brać* (‘I can even take him from behind’; line 67a). This phrase, colloquial and rather explicit, albeit without any profanities equivalent to those present in the source live version, is coherent with the image in the video and retains the original idea of the lyrics. Such a reference to the performative level and to the variableness of renditions by the artist is another example of how intersemiotic elements may direct the translator.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to verify the hypothesis that the intersemiotic, non-verbal layers of a song play a substantial role in reconstructing style and meaning in the process of song translation. As presented, all semiotic levels prove relevant in this song. Automatonlike music invites non-standard linguistic solutions such as bold enjambments, and its dissonant fragments suggest moments of heightened intensity, where the contradictory emotions of the protagonist are at play. The two strongly contrasted aesthetic styles of the video disclose the deeper meaning of the lyrics, clearly indicating which elements belong to reality, and which to the world of fantasy. Cabaret-like styling on all semiotic levels invites a translator to include references to similar genre conventions in the target culture, and performative aspects of live renditions encourage a search for variant solutions in the translation. It should also be mentioned that these semiotic codes do not exist in separation from one another, but form an interrelated web of meanings and cultural references, mutually amplifying and contextualising their semantic value.

Song translation studies are no longer, as was the case merely one or two decades ago, an underrepresented area of translation studies. Within this subfield, more and more research is being conducted in the descriptive line on the authorial role of a translator, the position of translated songs within

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 368–436.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the role of carnivalisation in this genre see Mach “What Is Punk Cabaret? An Attempt to Define and Exemplify the Phenomenon,” 157–158.

the target culture, and the multitude of cultural references involved in the process of translation. With this paper I hope to contribute to further development of this fascinating domain.

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## Appendix 1: *Coin-Operated Boy*: lyrics and translation

Line no.	<i>Coin-Operated Boy</i> (lyrics and music by Amanda Palmer, performed by The Dresden Dolls, transcription Anna Mach based on the album version, parts marked [] are absent from the video-clip version)	"Au-tomatyczny pan" (translated by Anna Mach)
1	Coin-operated boy	Au-tomatyczny pan
2	Sitting on the shelf	Odłożoną w kąt
3	He is just a toy	Tę zabawkę mam,
4	But I turn him on	Lecz gdy włączam „Start”
5	And he comes to life	On zaczyna czuć
6	Automatic joy	Sztucznych uczuć żar
7	That is why I want	Po to właśnie jest
8	A coin-operated boy	Mój au-tomatyczny pan
9	Made of plastic and elastic	Naręczony na żetony
10	He is rugged and long-lasting	Dość solidnie jest zrobiony
11	Who could ever, ever ask for more?	Czegóż jeszcze więcej można chcieć?
12	Love without complications galore	Mogę tulić go i głupstwa pleść
13	[Many shapes and weights to choose from	[Rozmiar ręcznie sterowany
14	I will never leave my bedroom	Już nie ruszę się z sypialni



Line no.	<i>Coin-Operated Boy</i> (lyrics and music by Amanda Palmer, performed by The Dresden Dolls, transcription Anna Mach based on the album version, parts marked [] are absent from the video-clip version)	“Au-tomatyczny pan” (translated by Anna Mach)
15	I will never cry at night again	Dosyć mam samotnych łez co noc
16	Wrap my arms around him and pretend]	Włączę go na maksymalną moc]
17	Coin-operated boy	Au-tomatyczny pan
18	All the other real	W porównaniu z nim
19	Ones that I destroy	Inni są bez szans
20	Cannot hold a candle	Zbyt ich łatwo skrzywdzić
21	To my new boy and I'll	I dlatego nigdy
22	Never let him go	Mu nie powiem „Precz!”
23	And I'll never be alone	I nie będę sama już
24	[And I'll never let him go	[Nigdy mu nie powiem „Precz!”
25	And I'll never be alone]	I nie będę sama już]
26	Go!	Precz!
27	And I'll never be alone	I nie będę sama już
28	Go!	Precz!
29	And I'll never be alone	I nie będę sama już
30	Go!	Precz!
31	And I'll never be alone	I nie będę sama już
32	Go!	Precz!
33	And I'll never be alone	I nie będę sama już
34	Not with my	Bo jest mój
35	Coin-operated boy	Au-tomatyczny pan
36	This bridge was written	Teraz gram przejście
37	To make you feel smittener	O pani po przejściach
38	With my sad picture	Bo miłość już w cenie
39	Of girl getting bitterer	Ma rozgoryczenie
40	Can you extract me	Czy ty mnie ocalisz
41	From my plastic fantasy?	Od marzeń z plastiku?
42	I didn't think so	Już chyba nie wierzę
43	But I'm still convincible	A jednak się łudzę
44	[Will you persist	I czy się nie poddasz
45	Even after I bet you	Gdy wprost w twarz ci krzyknę
46	A billion dollars	Że nigdy przynigdy
47	That I'll never love you?	Nie będę cię kochać?
48	And] will you persist	I czy się nie poddasz
49	Even after I kiss you	Nawet kiedy oznajmię
50	Good-bye for the last time	Że właśnie odchodzę
51	Will you keep on trying?	Czy będziesz próbować?

Line no.	<i>Coin-Operated Boy</i> (lyrics and music by Amanda Palmer, performed by The Dresden Dolls, transcription Anna Mach based on the album version, parts marked [] are absent from the video-clip version)	“Au-tomatyczny pan” (translated by Anna Mach)
52	To prove it	Ja muszę
53	I'm dying	To wiedzieć
54	To lose it	Choć nie chcę
55	I'm losing	Choć tracę
56	My confidence	Odwagę, i
57	I want it × 4 [× 3]	Po to jest
58	I want you × 8 [× 3]	Po to on
59	I want a × 3 [× 3]	Po to mi
60	I	Po
61	Want	To
62	A	Mi
63	Coin-operated boy	Au-tomatyczny pan
64	And if I had a star to wish on	Choćbym miała trzy życzenia
65	For my life I can't imagine	Już go nigdy nie wymienię
66	Any flesh and blood would be his match	Panów z krwi i kości nie chcę znać
67	I can even take him in the bath	Mogę nawet go do wanny brać
67a	[LIVE: I can even fuck him in the ass]	[LIVE: Mogę nawet go od tyłu brać]
68	Coin-operated boy	Au-tomatyczny pan
69	He may not be real	Nie znał może zbyt
70	Experienced with girls	Wielu innych pań
71	But I know he feels	Ale dobrze wie
72	Like a boy should feel	Jak zrozumieć mnie
73	Isn't that the point?	Żadnych kłamstw i gier
74	That is why I want	Po to właśnie jest
75	A coin-operated boy	Mój au-tomatyczny pan
76	With a pretty coin-	Nie zadaje e-
77	-operated voice	-mocjonalnych ran
78	Saying that he loves me	Mówi że mnie kocha
79	That he's thinking of me	Że beze mnie szlocha
80	Straight and to the point	Żadnych gier i kłamstw
81	That is why I want	Po to właśnie jest
82	A coin-operated boy	Mój au-tomatyczny pan

## Rola elementów intersemiotycznych w tłumaczeniu piosenki – na przykładzie *Coin-Operated Boy* zespołu The Dresden Dolls

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł prezentuje rolę elementów intersemiotycznych w tłumaczeniu piosenki na przykładzie utworu *Coin-Operated Boy* zespołu The Dresden Dolls w polskim przekładzie autorki. Jego celem jest rekonstrukcja znaczeń w oparciu o pozawerbalne kody semiotyczne: muzykę, wykonanie, warstwę wizualną i kontekst kulturowy. Multimodalne nośniki znaczenia wydają się szczególnie istotne w muzyce alternatywnej. Dotyczy to nurtu *punk cabaret* posługującego się specyficzną estetyką neowiktoriańską, cyrkową, burleskową i kabaretową, w której poziom wykonawczy jest równie istotny, jak tekst i muzyka. Warstwa tekstowa omawianego utworu znajduje uzupełnienie w muzyce i oficjalnym wideoklipie. W artykule przedstawiono, w jaki sposób te elementy kierują tłumacza w stronę określonych wyborów językowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** tłumaczenie piosenki, intersemiotyczny, *punk cabaret*, The Dresden Dolls, Amanda Palmer.

## Die Rolle intersemiotischer Elemente in der Liederübersetzung am Beispiel von The Dresden Dolls' *Coin-Operated Boy*

**Abstract:** Im Beitrag wird die Rolle intersemiotischer Elemente in der Liederübersetzung am Beispiel der polnischen Übersetzung von *Coin-Operated Boy* von der Band The Dresden Dolls erörtert. Anhand außertextueller semiotischer Codes wie Musik, Performance, visuelle Aspekte und kultureller Kontext wird der Prozess der Bedeutungsrekonstruktion dargestellt. Die multimedialen Bedeutungsträger spielen in der alternativen Musik eine besondere Rolle. Dies trifft auf Punk Cabaret zu – jenes Musikgenre, das sich einer spezifischen neoviktorianischen, zirzensischen, possenhaften und Kabarett-Ästhetik bedient, wobei der performative Aspekt genauso wichtig wie der Text und Musik ist. Das besprochene Lied wird durch die Musik und einen Videoclip ergänzt. Im Beitrag wird untersucht, wie diese Bestandteile bestimmte Übersetzungslösungen beeinflussen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Liederübersetzung, intersemiotisch, Punk Cabaret, The Dresden Dolls, Amanda Palmer.