

Anne-Line Hannesen. *Bitterkomix -- A South African Comic as an Indigenous Ethnography*. European University Studies Series XIX Vol. 70 Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2007, 130pp. \$32.95. 978-3-631-55238-4.

This master's thesis in anthropology by Anne-Line Hannesen was rightly chosen to be published in this scientific series. For despite the very specific angle -- South African comics authors as sources of information about their own people and culture --, Hannesen's monograph has a lot to offer for scholars interested in various subjects: comics in general, geographic variation in comics, underground comics, ethnology, South Africa, African history.

Hannesen starts out by briefly introducing the white Afrikaner culture in South Africa and the provocative and influential role the comic *Bitterkomix* has played in its 15 years of existence. Then she goes on explaining the main foundation of her work: that indigenous people can serve as ethnographers for their own culture, because every view on a culture is necessarily subjective. If one keeps in mind that every subjective view has to be complemented by other views, research can profit a great deal from an indigenous source. She also claims that visual culture is especially apt for transferring information about the culture, because so much of a culture is necessarily reflected in the images, even without taking the subject matter into consideration. Apart from bibliographic research, Hannesen's work relies heavily on field research, carried out during a six weeks stay in South Africa. She visited an international comics festival organized by one of the *Bitterkomix* founders and interviewed a great deal of the -- admittedly small -- South African comics scene.

One of the problematic issues with Hannesen's reading *Bitterkomix* as ethnographic material is the difficulty to distinguish personal information from general cultural and historical background. This is especially hard because a lot of *Bitterkomix* stories (especially Kannemeyer's) clearly contain autobiographical elements. To be able to separate the autobiographical from the cultural, or put otherwise, to be able to distinguish the specific from the general, Hannesen includes an elaborate biography of both authors whose work she discusses at length: Conrad Botes (aka Konradski) and Anton Kannemeyer (aka Joe Dog), the founders of *Bitterkomix*. This section of her book provides an important addition to partial sources such as Meesters (2000a; 2006b) or some contributions to Kannemeyer & Botes (2006). After a brief and rather uninformed general historical comics background, more interesting paragraphs deal with the history of South African comics (citing sources that are difficult to access outside of South Africa) and an overview of the South African comics scene today, thereby updating and elaborating the information from earlier attempts such as Meesters (2000b).

After these introductory chapters, Hannesen arrives at the core chapters of her book. In the fourth she treats the emergence and evolution of

Bitterkomix's style by discussing the reception by art critics, the press, and general public, the stylistic references, Kannemeyer's alter ego in the comics, the use of porno and self-mockery, and finally the future of the *Bitterkomix* magazine. As earlier in the biographical paragraphs, Hannesen uses the opportunity to introduce many of *Bitterkomix*'s recurring themes and methods, such as porno and provocation. Especially the way she explains the use of porno to address serious (often political) issues is well done. At the same time, she doesn't neglect the liberating effect on the authors of drawing images that some Afrikaners consider morally despicable. Researchers and comics readers from other cultural backgrounds often have difficulties grasping this extremely efficient use of pornography in *Bitterkomix*, which has led to a misunderstanding of the magazine abroad (Meesters 2006a) or to censorship issues in the U.S. and the UK. The reception part reveals that *Bitterkomix* is considered a part of the South African art scene and that it has caused quite a number of reactions, both shocked and enthusiastic, from the general public and the general press in South Africa. In the longest chapter, "Bitterkomix -- an Indigenous Ethnography," Hannesen addresses the central claim of her book. She does this by analyzing some key stories in *Bitterkomix*, assembling them around themes: growing up in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, sexuality and shame, conscription, and the Afrikaans language. To be able to decode the comics as ethnography, Hannesen uses the knowledge from the previous chapters and literary interpretation. Her anthropological point of view accounts for the rather superficial nature of several interpretations and explains why she is not really interested in the narrative form or the comics conventions employed. She only wants the general commentary about Afrikaner culture to emerge, so an interpretation to the bone was not necessary for her book. It may be surprising that most themes she describes, are not specifically South African. World literature can present countless stories of growing up in repressive religious communities.

Interestingly, racial issues are mostly shown as secondary themes, as a consequence of authoritarian tendencies in Afrikaner culture, for example in stories about the language. Hannesen is therefore entirely right when she looks at *Bitterkomix* as a reflection on Afrikaner culture only, and not as a criticism of the entire new South Africa. Maybe this part of her book could have profited more from the sources she cites, such as Barnard (2004).

All in all, one can regret that Hannesen's book has not benefited from a more meticulous editing before publication. Her rendering of comics history is clearly not meant to be scrutinized by comics historians. Moreover, her English is perfectly understandable, but could have easily been corrected in order not to distract the reader from the valuable content. The appreciation of her central claim, that *Bitterkomix* can serve as indigenous ethnography, may vary. But her book has two major merits which for a comics scholar will certainly outweigh the flaws named above. Firstly, Hannesen's book passes on a lot of

information which had only been available to a few people before. The way she positions *Bitterkomix* within the background of Afrikaner culture and history, her portrayal of South African comics in general, and the specific background she provides for an enriched reading of *Bitterkomix* (background about authors, comics, and relevant themes) had not been seen together like this before. Secondly, because of her attentive reading and thorough field work, she is able to present culturally justified interpretations of the work, relatively unbiased by her own European background. I've only been able to find one example where it is not entirely clear whether Hannesen has completely understood the sarcasm intended by the authors, namely where she seems to imply that *Bitterkomix* has adopted some of the old Afrikaner values by thanking God for the reader support (p.73). In all other cases, she succeeds in filling the gaps, closing the gutters so to speak, so that readers who do not know South Africa and the Afrikaner people as well as she does, can nevertheless grasp the meaning of these comics which can be bewildering for outsiders. Hannesen enables the reader to read *Bitterkomix* stories for what they are: texts which attempt to deconstruct the mythical identity of the Afrikaners and their traditional value system from within.

Gert Meesters

References

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