

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOUTH AFRICAN
UNDERGROUND COMICS.**

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ABSTRACT

In a critical analysis of several independently produced South African comics of the 1980s and early 1990s, close analysis of the comics leads to an assessment of the artists' intentions and purposes.

Discussion of the artists' sources focuses on definitions of different types of comics. What is defined as a comic is usually what has been produced under that definition, and these comics are positioned somewhere between the popular and fine art contexts.

As the artists are amateurs, the mechanical structure of comics is exposed through their skill in manipulating, and their initial ignorance of, many comic conventions. By comparison to one another, and to the standard format of commercial comics, some explanation of how a comic works can be reached.

The element of closure, bridging the gaps between frames, is unique to comics, and is the most important consideration. Comic artists work with the intangible, creating from static elements an illusion of motion. If the artist deals primarily with what is on the page rather than what is not, the comic remains static. Questions of quality are reliant on the skill with which closure is implemented.

The art students who produced these comics are of a generation for whom popular culture is the dominant culture, and they create for an audience of peers. Their cultural milieu is more visual than verbal, and often more media oriented than that of their teachers. They must integrate a fine art training and understanding into the preset rules of a commercial medium. Confronted with the problem of a separation of languages, they evolve a new dialect. Through comparative and critical analyses I will show how this

dialect differs from the language of conventional comics, attempting in particular to explain how the mechanics of the comic medium can limit or expand its communicative potential.

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"Does he paint? He fain would write a poem - / Does he write? He fain would paint a
picture." (Robert Browning)

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1. INTRODUCTION

What I am attempting in this thesis is an analysis of South African underground comics produced in the 1980s and early 1990s. Firstly, I should emphasize that my intention is not to prove that these comics are fine art. This is the usual argument given, even by their creators, to justify their existence. Instead, I will try to find from these comics their own definition: a position that is necessary given their overwhelming purpose, which would seem to be that of experimentation.

So I will first broadly sketch my opinion of the situation of South African underground comics. Then I will define and discuss the various sources that these South African comics draw from, the better to separate them from these sources. Finally, through both critical and comparative analyses, with direct reference to these and other comics, I will examine the work of individual artists. Discussion of methods of working will thus lead to an assessment of intentions and purposes. Over time, the nature of these underground comics has changed, and the quality improved. By comparing these comics to one another, I will try to clarify the nature of these changes. In doing so, I hope to indicate the potential of this medium, as intimated by the progress it has already made.

Since the early 1980s a change has occurred in the nature of comics worldwide, such that comics are now accepted as a respectable, if minor, literary form. Critics claim that "graphic novels' reflect society as seriously as fiction, painting or cinema." (Hornblower, 1993, p.53). The artists have taken cognisance of these critical developments, and have certainly been inspired by them, but the comics do not quite fit into this new and narrowing definition. They are also not traditional comics, as comics produced before the 1980s are called, although elements from traditional comics are used. South African

"undergrounds" are classifiable together only because they sidestep other classifications, whether this be because of methods of publication and production, or because of content. A fragment of a novel called Like Mother (Diski, p.26-27), can supply a useful analogy:

Slime Mold

I read about Slime Molds in...the Encyclopaedia Britannica....The next part of the article concerned more developed forms of life and began: "Much of the beauty and diversity of contemporary life on earth is due to sex."

Slime Molds exist in the soil of this planet. As many as a billion of them exist in just 1 sq foot of earth. This is because they are very small.

The problem about slime molds is that it's very hard to decide if they are plants or animals. To overcome this ambiguity, Haeckel, the German taxonomist, invented the term 'protista', which was to designate them a separate category from 'plantae' and 'animalia'. But this was merely a cunning device to prevent people from spending too much time worrying about the real problem that remained and remains unsolved: are slime molds creatures or things? The answer is that they are neither and both. But it's upsetting.

When slime molds ... begin their life cycle they veer towards being a lower order of plant, at the fungal end of life. But we don't expect much of fungi, so slime molds surprise us. Later, when they aggregate, creep, and feed, they are more like animals. They do things, like go about in gangs.

To begin with, these are just single-celled amoeba, which...lead a solitary

existence...until food gets short. Then, instead of just quietly starving to death, they start to move...all in the same direction...The cells in front produce a substance that stimulates others to follow and join. Repulsion is replaced by the herd instinct, until, finally, a great migration occurs and the cells meet and swarm. Then there are no more individual cells; the slime mold has become a single shape that moves and looks exactly like a slug....Now the slug begins to change...until it explodes spores into the soil, each becoming a single-celled amoeba-like thing that manages very well on its own, thank you.

The life-cycle of the slime mold takes place within 20 hours. Longevity is not a characteristic of this species.

All this may seem purposeful....But there's not a whit of intention about any of it. Scientists are quite clear that the whole devious business comes about because the single cells produce a substance called adenosine monophosphate. An enzyme, I think. It's got nothing to do with wanting anything.

Like slime molds, comics are often, or have been until now, ignored because they are small and apparently simplistic. Similarly, referring to some respectable comics as graphic novels has much the same effect as calling slime mold protista. It does not clarify the ambiguity, nor does it answer the question; the term in itself perpetuates the question. Are comics art or literature? The answer is also in the terminology, because they are neither and both, and a separate thing entirely, and no doubt it is upsetting.

Clearly the stage in the life-cycle of comics that I am concerned with is that in which

several small comic producers, "at the fungal end of life", gather to publish their work together. Nothing is expected of them, not even commercial success. They usually lead a solitary existence until they decide to publish. Money being short, this is the time to seek other comic artists and band together. These alliances may or may not last longer than the first publication, and often seem random or haphazard. This is due to something similar in action to the enzyme produced by the slime mold. "It's got nothing to do with wanting anything." The comics are seldom produced according to a plan. They may grow into something sturdier and more definite, as *Bitterkomix* has, but initially they just happen. This mysterious motivation is the particular subject of this thesis.

These comics are not published for commercial profit. Nor are they published as works of art, the collections often not being coherent enough in style or content to form a single artistic expression, especially in the initial stages. They are published simply because the possibility of publication exists.

Their nature owes something to commercial comics, something to graphic novels, something to fine art, something to book illustration, something to fanzines (independantly produced newspapers dealing with narrowly defined subject matter, created largely by the consumers themselves). But they are none of these.

South African undergrounds lack some of the selfconsciousness of contemporary graphic novels. The issue of using the comic medium for "non-comic" purposes is often part of the subject of more literary comics; *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, which won a 1992 Pulitzer Prize, dwells on this aspect at length. A characteristic feature of much post-modernist work, self-examination reaches almost apologetic proportions in serious graphic novels because "... comics have an image problem." (Hornblower, 1993, p.53). South African undergrounds do not deal with this problem explicitly; in fact it tends to be ignored. What

is making comics respectable in the eyes of cultural critics is that "comics are attracting ever more serious artists ready to apply sequential art to the spectrum of literary genres." (p.53) The difference with undergrounds is that of approach: instead of viewing comics from a literary angle, the artists are grounded in a tradition that accepts comics unapologetically as comics, so that the problem of respectability, or lack of it, is not applicable. The age of the artists is a determining factor; all are still younger than 25 at the time of publication of their most recent work, still part of a generation for whom popular 'lowbrow' culture is the dominant culture. To people immersed in pop culture, demystification is at best irrelevant and at worst destructive.

"Pop that unravels its own workings, undoes itself. Pop, by definition, must mystify. Marc Bolan...said it best: 'pop should be a spell.'" (Reynolds, 1990, p.105)

The concomitant lack of reverence for the medium is a function of this youthfulness. To most of the artists, work on comics represents an escape from more serious projects. This accounts, furthermore, for the frivolous, yet literate, quality of some of the work.

South African underground comic artists create largely for an audience of peers. The confusion that exists in the marketing of more professional comics, as to whether the audience is composed of adults or children, is not present here. While a few publications are available in specialist comic shops in Johannesburg and Cape Town, most advertising is done by word-of-mouth; further publicity is generated through advertisements in music magazines and other comics, and posters in nightclubs and music shops. Sales are arranged on a mailorder basis by the artists and writers. The entire process of production is informal and individually supervised.

Underground comics are not part of the mainstream of comics, because they are too specific to their audience. There is a possibility of growth in the act of publishing collections of comic strips, as there is a possibility of higher development in the accretion of a slime mold; but the absence of any clear, stated reasons for banding together limit this possibility. Further growth would have to occur outside the already established format of these comics, thus changing their nature. Because of this position, somewhere between popular and fine art, because of this seeming lack of purpose, and because longevity is not a characteristic of this medium, South African undergrounds do not represent a threat of change to mass-produced comics of any persuasion, or to established fine art ideology.

Yet, given the situation of underground comics as well as their genealogy, an element of subversive intent in their structure is inescapable. Content that is controversial (such as drugs, sex, or excessive violence) and formal experiments that sometimes lead to sheer incomprehensibility are attacks on strict categorization of genres, on "...the mind's tendency to systematize..." (Reynolds, 1990, p.11). Bitterkomix's work in Afrikaans is an arguably more worthy attempt than most, and explains their relative conservatism. The ready acceptance of underground comics into some areas of the art establishment bears out Roy Lichtenstein's statement, in 1963, when he "... commented about the use of commercial subject matter that 'apparently they didn't hate that enough either'" (Hendrikson, 1988, p.83). Pop art had been intended originally as an affront. In a similar way Bitterkomix's confrontational elements were politely ignored as the artists were interviewed on television, and the comics exhibited in galleries, and quoted in the press. The further they were taken out of context, the easier this was to do. Some frustration at this treatment was subsequently vented in the publication of a comic dealing solely with pornography, Gif. Yet the question of appropriately matching the audience to the artwork was raised.

Most of these comics are produced as comics purely because of the cheapness and simplicity of the medium. Certainly the most effective way to reach a teenage audience visually would be through their daily media: advertising, television, and especially music video. Underground comics often approach the condition of a three-minute music video in their brevity and economy, as well as stylistically. (The issue of style will be discussed in more detail later.) In a sense, comics are the "lo-tech" version of video and film. Video cameras, computer graphics programmes and editing suites are expensive, specialised, and hard to come by, in contrast to the pen, paper and photocopier machine needed for the production of a comic. "Comics aren't difficult. You can draw a frame or two over breakfast", is the opinion of Petr Sorfa, a computer graphics student who has published comics annually since 1990.

Any discussion of the sources of SA comics will have to focus on the naming of comics, simply because there is so much confusion about and resistance to the terminology applied to comics. At present:

"...a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a 'comic'.

There has been a historical process whereby public arguments and comics, and what is acceptable under that name, have become in their turn powerful determinants of what is produced." (Barker, 1989, p.8)

"Even so, we cannot answer the question 'What is a comic?' by formal qualities alone. A comic is what has been produced under that controlling definition." (p.9)

Taking this into consideration, I have incorporated definitions of the various relevant types of comics into a brief history of comics, using changes and innovations in the medium as a means of clarifying and separating different types. The following is by no

means a comprehensive history of comics; rather, it is a list of terminology, chronologically ordered, with descriptions and background information that serve to put the terminology in context.

2. DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The term **comics** today covers almost any composition of sequential pictures and words in a print medium, usually with a narrative element, "[a] narrative work [being] any artistic work that relates by its style and composition to a figurative representation in time, without necessarily being in all cases a 'narrative'". (Couperie, 1968, p.231)

The direct ancestors of comics were European newspaper cartoons of the 1880s; each cartoon had an accompanying caption that rendered the image more comprehensible, a device also used in book illustration of the time. The pictures were simply illustrations of the text, copying as closely as possible the devices of realism used in 19th century painting, especially literary or historical painting. Because illustration was a commercial art, intended for consumption by a broad spectrum of society, conservatism in drawing styles was a prerequisite for any artist working in this field. Formal innovation in comics developed along a different route from that in fine art.

An economy of drawing, that could explain a situation or an interaction swiftly and clearly without words, was the first step towards a style distinctive to comics. Strips like The Katzenjammer Kids owed much of their success to cleaner, simpler drawings.

Most of the conventions of comics developed alongside those of film, so that methods of depicting space, time, mood, and so on, are similar. In effect, comics originated as a hybrid of film and the classical arts such as painting and literature, as "[t]he comic frame...condenses time within its still image..." (Barker, 1989, p.8). Put another way, a young comics reader says: "television programs are really comics that move." (Wertham, 1955, p.381)

However, because comics are a purely visual medium, and because the first uses of comics were narrative, the similarity to film became so pronounced that the verbal element of comics came under scrutiny. As in early films, sound was a problem. Writing had to be incorporated into the boundaries of the picture frame, and visual equivalents for literary punctuation invented.

Thus the narrating voice is sidelined into boxes at the top or bottom of frames, and speech is represented by balloons or speech bubbles - a written speech superimposed on the drawing, with a tail indicating which character is speaking. The verbal economy of this method of depicting sound visually means that overt narration - captions in boxes - can be kept to a minimum. The pictures tell the story. Characters' emotions or tone of voice are expressed through variations in the size of the lettering and the bubble as well as the shape of the bubble. "The balloon itself conditions the meaning, by showing us the kind of force the words are meant to have." (Barker, 1989, p.11) Loud exclamations, for instance, are shown as large lettering tightly enclosed in a spiky balloon. An indication of the sound of a voice can be given through the lettering itself: squeaky voices, for instance, require thin, scratchy lettering. "It is as if, in fact, we don't READ the words at all. We hear them. We might put it that in the comic form, there is an interaction between the pictureness and the verbalness of the speech-balloon, to produce the meaning of the sound. We 'hear' with our eyes." (p.11) Thoughts can also be written, enclosed in cloud-like bubbles. The non-verbal nature of thoughts can be expressed symbolically, by placing pictures instead of words within the thought bubble. "The most usual manifestations are in the form of a picture of a lighted electric bulb [to suggest an idea]...[I]t may even depict entire scenes illustrating a dream or memory." (Couperie, 1968, p.179) In the use of this device, verbal and visual communication are collapsed together in the manner of hieroglyphs; these thought symbols demonstrate clearly the essentials of comic communication.

In addition, extraverbal sounds, or 'soundeffects', are written onomatopoeically, without bubbles. Soundeffects are incorporated directly into the matrix of the picture frame - more than any other comic convention, they bring the imitative quality of the pictures closer to that which is purely readable; words like 'zap' and 'bang' are written over the most realistic illustrations. One boy examined by Dr Frederick Wertham, a vehement denouncer of comics in the 1950s, compiled a list of words such as " OWW, ARGHH, OOOHHH, WHAM, GLURG, UGH, GLHELP, KURRACK, PING, THUNK, BLAM, TEOW, UNGH, BAM, ZING, AANGH, ARRGR, OOOOOO!, HAH!, GLUG-UGH" and called it "basic American." (Wertham, p.145) Often the soundeffects are among the most inventive aspects of a comic. Japanese comics, which use a minimum of verbal narrative, incorporate sound effects for almost silent phenomena such as milk being added to coffee (SUROW), or leaves falling from trees (HIRA HIRA). "[W]hen someone's face reddens in embarrassment the sound is PO; and the sound of no sound at all is a drawn-out SHIIN..." (Noake, 1988, p.23)

Speech bubbles and written sound effects are the most instantly recognisable aspect of comics, the most definitive, and the most important: they are what make comics comics. Any work containing speech bubbles is almost certain to be termed a comic, while comics without speech bubbles are frequently given other names in an attempt to separate them from 'real' comics.

A comic frame is not simply a window onto a scene, to be viewed naturalistically. Each picture must be read, scanned for information relevant to the narrative, from details of spatial orientation to more intangible qualities such as emotion. The lettering only carries part of the story. The pictures are not merely illustrative of the captions, but active in the unfolding of the story. It follows that traditional pictorial conventions must be

adapted, the overall effect of this being a slight violation of the convention of the picture frame as a realistic window.

If each frame is then viewed as part of a sequence rather than studied individually, direction lines or multiple outlines that suggest movement, speech balloons and sound effects serve to heighten the impression of realism more than to limit it. The essential requirement of a reader is an understanding that comic illustrations are as much a language, and decipherable in the same way, as words are. Japanese comic artist Osamu Tezuka has said of his work: "In reality I'm not drawing. I'm writing a story with a unique type of symbol." (Noake, 1988, p.25)

Possibly because comics are "children's entertainment", their role in the teaching of visual literacy has not been taken very seriously in the past, or examined closely in any but a negative light. Yet in comics, visual literacy has been a prerequisite to even the most basic enjoyment, for many decades. Studies conducted in the 1950s in America found children "who have developed a special kind of 'reading'. They have become what I call 'picture-readers'" (Wertham, 1955, p.139) Further, Dr Wertham concluded, "[t]hat they [American comics] are sold in countries where the children cannot read English shows that children 'read' them just from the pictures." (p.260) Unfortunately Wertham's studies aimed to prove a connection between comic reading and juvenile delinquency. His findings led him to state that:

"[t]his kind of picture reading is not actually a form of reading; nor is it a pre-stage of reading. It is an evasion of reading and almost it's opposite....[comics] cause reading disorders by luring children with the primary appeal of pictures as against early training to real reading...."
(p.140)

The decision as to whether visual literacy is desirable or not is apparently dependant on the environment within which such theories are constructed. In Japan, comics have long been an acceptable form of literature. In 1980, 27% of all published material were comics (Schodt, 1983, p.12), read by both adults and children. Neurophysiologists, psychologists, and educators stated in an article in a Tokyo newspaper in 1981 that:

"...since comics combine language and pictures, they stimulate both right and left hemispheres [of the brain] and should contribute to improved design capability and pattern recognition...[They also] develop in readers an ability to quickly perceive the essence of a problem without relying on linear logic; and they may be a factor in the dexterity with which young Japanese handle computers..." (p.21)

Whatever the merits of comic reading skills, comics remain incomprehensible without their acquisition. "Readers have to learn the skills of understanding the relation between separate pictures. Each one is a 'still frame' out of a moving sequence; and that one is 'later' than this one." (Barker, 1982, p.6)

An example from personal experience that demonstrates the unique nature of such reading skills is that of the 1990 Rhodes Rag Magazine. The standard format of such magazines consists of pages of unrelated jokes and cartoons. The editors tried to alter this format to that of a comic, with a continuous story running through the entire issue. Even though the contents page stated explicitly that the publication was a comic, the immediate realization of this was hampered by the editors' conceit of using pictures from diverse sources to construct the actual narrative. The magazine failed dismally; readers could not make sense of it, because they treated each frame as a separte item. In this case, even the presence of captions, speech bubbles and directional arrows were not

enough to alert an uninformed audience as to which deciphering skills to use.

Most developments in comic books were initiated in the United States. Due to syndication, they spread almost instantaneously to the rest of the world; in fact, the influence of American innovations in comics were strengthened in other countries because of syndication. American strips were translated into the local language, then printed; publishers favoured imported comics, as only translators, rather than writers and artists, had to be paid.

Directly due to distribution methods, American comics became the standard, the correct way to do comics. No comic was a comic unless it was done the American way. Thus experiments in American comics were instantly transported not only to other countries, but also into the comics canon of correctness. National variations in comics were regarded as idiosyncratic and of a lower standard.

The comic revolution, the integration of text and image, started at the end of the nineteenth century. Right from the beginning, comics were conceived of as a commercial venture: as an added attraction in newspapers, and in book form as a free gift to advertise products. Until the 1930s, **comics** meant comic strips printed in newspapers, or reprints of these newspaper strips collected in book form, badly printed on cheap paper. It was only due to their popularity with readers that comics became an independent product.

The earliest comic strips were always humorous, since their purpose was to provide entertainment and relief from pages of news; hence the term **comics**, at first interchangeable with **funnies**.

For the first two decades of the twentieth century, the novelty of the medium itself was reason enough for adults to read them. But public opinion held that comics were not a real medium like writing, and therefore not worthy of serious attention: comics were a humorous diversion, read in earnest only by children and illiterate adults.

"From the beginning, then, comics were produced within a climate in which they were counterposed to everything dangerous. They were guaranteed to be non-serious literature, specially suited to children." (Barker, 1989, p.8)

In the 1920s strips like Tarzan and Buck Rogers were introduced. Being tales of adventure and intrigue, these comics were drawn in a classically realistic, though exaggerated, style. Necessitating longer narratives than funnies, the four to six frame daily newspaper strips were lengthened, becoming monthly comic books. Strips were still serialized in the newspapers, and stories sometimes ran over several years, but comic books became independent of the newspapers. For the first time, publishing houses concentrating on comic books were profitable ventures.

Superman was created in the late 1930s; imitations soon followed. Superheroes dominated the market completely in the 1940s and 1960s, with a brief respite during the 1950s when crime comics, a closely related genre, gained popularity for a while. At present superhero comics still make up the bulk of comics produced in the United States.

"[These comics] partly owed their success to the fact that they never sounded the least note of satire or parody, and steered clear of controversy in any form." (Davidson, 1982, p.9)

The studio system of comic book production became the norm: instead of individual

artists owning and working on strips, publishers bought the copyright to a particular character. Scriptwriters, pencillers, inkers and letterers were employed to produce comics as quickly as possible. Comics of this era are known as **classic comics**, or, alternatively, as **pulp comics**. Both these terms derive from the extraordinary numbers in which they were produced.

Stories were shifted from comic book to comic book, sometimes with a page added or replaced, sometimes with only the title changed. Millions of comics were being produced annually at this stage, in the late 1940s; there was a great demand for material, and little necessity for originality. Characters outlived their creators' careers, or were sold in mid-story to a different publishing house. Of necessity, formulae evolved, as much to accommodate these changes in ownership as to ensure longevity of profitable characters. Stereotyped characters, settings and scripts were mandatory, as artistic idiosyncracies hampered the ease with which assistants could copy. Heroes were square-jawed, crewcut and muscular, heroines curvaceous; both were white. Villains were foreigners or poor; physical deformity was shorthand for moral corruption. Good always triumphed over evil; criminals were always seeking money or political power. War and police stories predominated, even in superhero comics.

In the 1950s educators and parents became concerned about the content of comic books. Crime comics had become progressively more violent, and horror comics had emerged as an inevitable result, to cater to a public demanding yet more violence in both scripts and artwork. The vehemence of the attitude towards comics at the time is evident in a statement by Wertham:

"Comic books...are a debasement of the old institution of printing, the corruption of the art of drawing and almost an abolition of literary writing."

(Wertham, 1955, p.381)

Wertham's book The Seduction of the Innocent was influential in a campaign that pressured the comic industry into establishing a code promising morally "safer" comics. Sex and violence had to be censored, and proper respect for authorities (including parents and the Church) had to be shown.

Barker notes how the terminology applied to comics was influencing their development:

"...among the headlines of the time were many denouncing 'those so-called comics'. It was not just that they were not funny; they refused to be non-serious and harmless. Of course there was nothing wrong with producing witty, naive, and innocent fun for children. The problem was that nothing else was permitted. The definition of a comic had become a constraining force, requiring publishers to abide by it." (Barker, 1989, p.9)

For nearly 10 years any concern with comics concentrated only on the threat they presented to the youth, either through the corruption of values or by causing verbal illiteracy.

By the late 1960s many of the children who had grown up with horror and crime comics had become hippies. Seeking ways to attack the Establishment, inevitably they turned to the medium that had apparently threatened their own minds and souls in childhood, and **undergrounds** were born.

The artists themselves used the term **komix**; "underground" referred to the way these comics were distributed. Printed in the many newsletters and magazines that were sold in shops serving the new communities of hippies, komix flouted the conventions of the comics code and ignored the usual comic publishers, who would have been unable to print much of the material. Most of the artists remembered and were inspired by pre-

crackdown comics.

EC comics from the 1950s were particularly renowned for the levels of horror permitted, and were among the first to be purged from shops. But they had also been among the most experimental of comics, publishing many science fiction stories and aiming at a teenage rather than a child audience. In the 60s' atmosphere of resistance to any kind of authority, forbidden media like comics were irresistible. In addition comics were a popular medium; like any product of the mass media machine seemingly anonymously produced and omnipresent, part of The System and therefore ripe for subversion. Comics were cheap and easy to make, especially as reproductive methods became cheaper and easier to use. Artists realized that one person could produce an entire comic on their own.

Because underground comics catered to a very specific and close audience, they spread quickly through America, from one hippie community to another. The artists were well-known and part of the audience. There were few distinctions between producers and consumers.

"The underground strip was regarded as a powerful and subversive tool, able to change political as well as cultural conceptions. Quality was therefore a means, not an end, which went to show that comics were not reserved for those who had been taught to draw them." (Davidson, 1982, p.27)

The underlying message of komix was that anyone could make media, and by implication, that people could take control of their own culture, instead of being dependant on what was produced for them. Thus imagination and experimentation were more important than professionalism.

Undergrounds were amoral, sexual, scatological, irreverent, political; everything that comics were not allowed to be. They flourished briefly during the hippie era, but were so closely associated with that era that few survived it. Underground artists were also unable to make a living out of their work. Some artists who continued doing comics were subsequently employed by established comic publishers. They did succeed in bringing a fresh approach to existing comics, but in the 1970s superheroes dominated the market as the only genre that could still generate a level of interest among young consumers without disobeying the very powerful Comics Code.

The situation in Europe was slightly different from that in America. British comics existed in weekly, black and white format, resisting the excesses of American colour and adventure. Magazines were strictly separated into girls' and boys' stories, and then further into rigidly defined age-groups. Most were still based on pre-1950s models. The panic over horror and crime comics, which were mostly American, had resulted in deep conservatism in Britain. Comic publishers had avoided the controversy that had raged in the United States by censoring their own publications before public outcry could force them to do so. (An unforeseen result of this was that as comics slowly came to be considered a more respectable medium, in the 1980s, British artists and writers were not restricted by the Comics Code.) Only "proper" children's material was allowed. Boys' comics contained stories about sport, war, space travel, family life, and school; girls' comics, stories about romance, work, family life, and school. As moralistic as American comics, there was one important difference: British comics purported to focus on reality rather than fantasy. Billy's Boots might be magic boots that enabled him to score goals from anywhere on the soccer field, but he still played on the school pitch, dreamed of the England team, and took flak from the school bully about his old-fashioned boots.

Superheroes did inevitably appear in these stories, but were always ridiculed. Rather than

being a dream to which all boys aspired and a hero all girls dreamed of, superheroes suffered extreme alienation and were burdened with unnecessary powers that often landed them in ludicrous, troublesome situations.

On the continent comics were a different species altogether. In France they were known as 'bandes dessinées'; in Holland as 'strips'. The terms are descriptive of the medium, rather than of an assumed content.

European comics were separated at an early stage from newspaper cartoons. After about 1930, comics appeared that were printed in book format, with sophisticated humour and complex plots. Artwork matched the sophistication of the scripts, and the majority were aimed at adults rather than children. Possibly these comics were one of the positive effects of American syndication. While syndication meant that artists and writers remained informed about innovations in American comics, syndicated strips occupied the attention of a largely undiscerning audience; thus locally produced comics were freed to cater to more demanding tastes and standards.

There is much debate over whether the next developments in comics were initiated in Britain, America, or Europe. In the late 1970s and early 1980s several diverse elements and circumstances combined to create a new environment for comics. Much of this was the result of wider distribution of comics, leading to a rapid interchange of ideas and influences that gained momentum in the next decade. In America, some underground artists were producing low-budget yet professional adult comics that were just then becoming commercially profitable. In Britain, writers particularly were not directly hampered by the Comics Code, and thus rather eccentric comics could be printed by established publishers. In addition, more English-language translations of European and even Japanese comics were appearing in bookshops. Slowly, all these diverse elements

coalesced into comics intended for consumption by an adult audience.

Ironically, adult comics could not be sold alongside more traditional comics; many violated the still powerful comics code and were not suitable for children. A new term, **graphic novels**, was used to facilitate separation of the adult and child markets, and also to combat resistance from consumers who were sceptical about these new comics. Graphic novels were sold in specialist comic shops that proliferated as the market grew. Printing was upgraded; large collections of complete stories were printed in colour on good quality paper. The usual coarse dot matrix was refined to the quality of that used in magazine photographs (which in turn meant that artwork could become more sophisticated, no longer restricted to what was reproducible.)

Soon even the term graphic novels was felt by some to be slightly perjorative, as comics began dealing with subjects that had until now been the domain of serious literature, with artwork of an equivalent standard. The dilemma was one that Pop Art had initiated and Post-modernism still wrestled with. Roy Lichtenstein had said, "I'd always wanted to know the difference between a mark that was art and one that wasn't." (Hendrikson, 1988, p.10) The new comics demanded definition of these categories. 'Graphic novel' was still too commercial a label. **Sequential art** became a preferred term; it seemed to emphasize that comics were no longer about making money. They had become equal to literature and art. Comics were not only respectable, they were fashionable.

The real value of reading comics, that verbal and visual communication combined can increase the clarity of a message as well as broaden and deepen it, was forgotten in the rush to turn every form of communication into a comic, just so that a higher price could be put on it. Obscure, respectable, boring comics appeared, beautifully painted and written, and judged by the standards of art cinema or magazine journalism. Yet comics

had been, and still were to a large extent, a pop medium. As Reynolds says about pop music:

"The demand for good songs occurs when people who have grown up with pop are forced to accommodate their love of pop within their new sense of themselves as responsible adults." (Reynolds, 1990, p.47)

A similar demand produced graphic novels and sequential art.

The 1980s also produced comics of an entirely contrasting nature, published in **fanzines**. As the name implies, fanzines are magazines for fans. They have proliferated since the late 1970s, and now cover every possible area of youth interest, not just music. More importantly, fanzines are informal, low-budget publications. They are much like underground newspapers, in that they are relatively free from censorship, have a similarly insular audience, and promote the same values. Fanzines frequently exhort readers to take an active part in media production. That, at least, is what some of the artists discussed below intended.

3. ANALYSIS

Four different groups of comics are examined in this analysis. Reference will be made to other examples and publications, but the comics examined in greatest detail will be Morai (from Cape Town) Komiksoc (Grahamstown), Desire (Johannesburg), and Bitterkomix (Stellenbosch). I have chosen to focus on these particular groups because each has produced comics of a similar format consistently over the same period of time. None of the artists had produced comics before embarking on these projects; the mechanisms of comics are thus easily exposed as the artists struggle to come to terms with their use.

I have kept the accounts of each publication largely chronological, referring to stories in the order in which they appear in the comics, except for instances of direct comparison. This is to facilitate an overall view of the artists' developments in skill, and changes in intentions.

I will be referring to the artists by the names they have chosen to work under. Where known, their names will initially appear in parentheses after the pseudonym.

3.1. MORAI

Morai 1 and 2 are the work of one artist from Cape Town. Either as cause or effect of this, Morai is the most 'underground' and hermetic of the examples.

While Komiksoc suffers from American influences, especially the Hernandez brothers (Love and Rockets), and the newer comics like Vertigo, and Bitterkomix from European (Moebius, Herge), Morai is strongly reminiscent of the fantasy genre favoured by British publishers like 2000 AD.

Stylistically, Morai shows little change over the two issues, other than a tightening of control and consequent increase in confidence. The drawings are psychedelic and idiosyncratic, the storylines similar. Drawing style and narrative style are linked in a central, constant story, with decorations, embellishments, and distractions that do not quite distract. In the second issue, the narrative is simpler and more focused. The covers themselves are very similar in terms of drawing, but issue 2's is compositionally tighter, as well as being a more conventional illustration. There is more humour in issue 2, and the drawings are bolder.

Compositions vary between a linear organisation of frames and a chaotic one. The artist favours the linear approach, with clarity or chaos conveyed by the density of drawing within frames. This is always in sympathy with the pace or intensity of the narrative; the more emotionally heightened the narrative, the more crowded the frames become.

There are moments of extreme experimentation, such as a blank page with the caption "In this frame is every emotion you can describe with a ...", which reveal selfconscious, self-mocking humour. These bursts of humour do not violate comic conventions. Even

incomprehensible passages are incomplete or unclear attempts at expression of a concept, rather than unprecedented subversions of comics conventions.

The greatest influence, that of comic artist Simon Bisley (2000AD: Slaine, ABC Warriors) is noticeable in detail and exaggerated "realism" and eccentricity of line. Morai goes beyond Bisley in decorativeness, and contains some of the most lyrical draughtsmanship in the sample.

Also like Bisley, realism and fantasy are combined in the drawing style. Plots have some possible basis in reality, but are abstracted beyond that. The stories are about fantastical quests, for wisdom, or a face, a self, or a place. The exaggerated elegance of the drawing complements the simplicity of the stories. Difficult motifs like birth [fig 1] are treated in an unsentimental yet whimsical fashion that render them manageable and amusing.

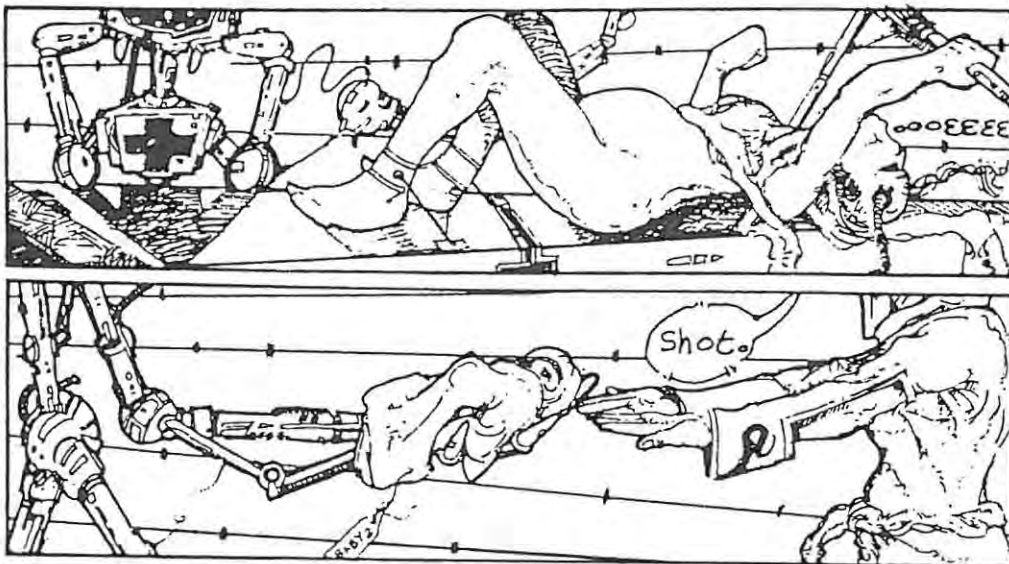


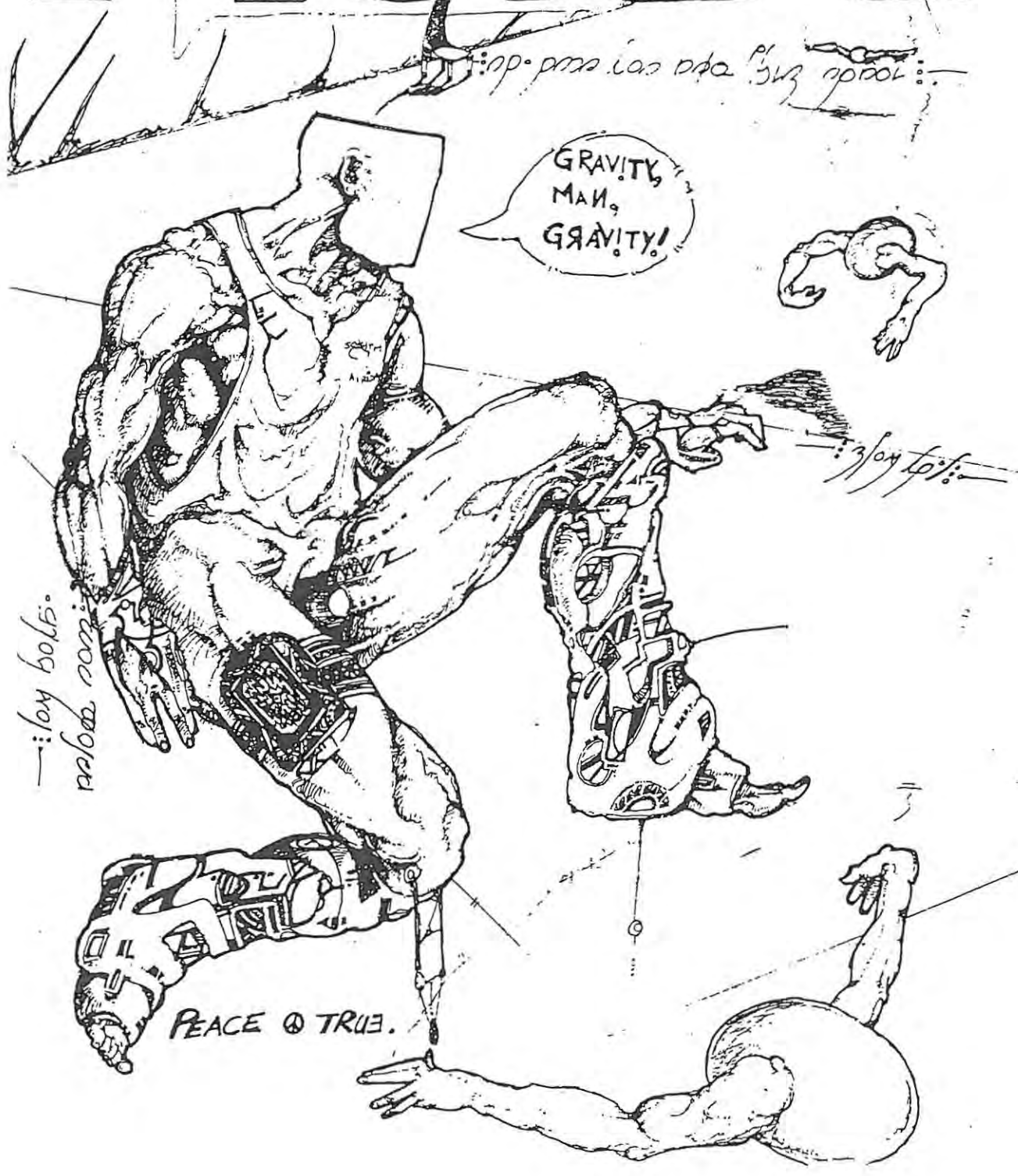
Figure 1 Mirror p6 Issue 1

Lyricalism is evident in the tension between the heavily worked areas and the flat black or white negative spaces. The decoration serves to flatten the three-dimensionality of

MORRIS

AY AY

COPY RIGHT MORRIS 1989



GRAVITY,
MAN,
GRAVITY!

—:loy bolts.
paboa con:

3/04 top!

PEACE @ TRUE.

Figure 2 Cover of Issue 1

positive shapes, even or especially when the decoration starts as shading to provoke a three-dimensional illusion, but then takes on a life of its own. The figures appear embedded in flat space, perhaps because there are no apparent (or consistent) light sources [fig 2]. Perspective also suffers from an attack of surrealism, with horizontal perspectives often rendered vertically; faraway objects teeter above foreground ones. Shadows are used almost in compensation [fig 3]; less to indicate form and light than to indicate space, and often perspective as well. Scale means very little in terms of spa



Figure 3 Angel? p5 Issue 1

A strongly narrative text means that much of the mood is described through the drawings. Were the verbal description to be complete, the drawings would do no more than illustrate. Here, however, the artist can elaborate the drawings, while illustrating or narrating the text; in the same way as humour is largely contained in little asides and footnotes and details, so is mood described visually in seemingly irrelevant details.

The unity between writing and drawing echoes the hermeticism of Morai's production; the artist has chosen his influences and thus his style, and works within these. No other influences distract him, for the time being, leaving him to refine rather than expand.

Free from interruption by other artists or writers, the narratives are so personal as to sometimes be almost incomprehensible. The stories are still stories, and not blatantly confessional, but direct confrontation with readers is more of an aim than a mere narration of events.

This aspect, more than any ignorance of comic conventions, is the most important in producing a comic that is more than an imitation of other comics.

3.2. KOMIKSOC

The confessional aspect of storytelling is markedly gendered in Komiksoc's productions. The female artists, Casey (Kirsty Cordell) and myself, speak in the first person directly of emotions; our stories are concerned with relationships. Andrew Macklin perhaps also addresses similar ground, but without the same directness.

Komiksoc began in 1989 as a loosely connected collective, which dwindled in numbers of contributors until 1993, the last year of production, when only two members remained. Some of the dispersed members produced some collaborative comics in Johannesburg, such as Greasy Hedgehogs and some contributions to Desire, but Komiksoc publications themselves contained very little collaboration. Each artist worked independantly, and work was seldom viewed until ready for publication; little or no criticism or communication took place until after completion of each story. Even covers were designed and drawn by a single person, without consultation with other members.

Komiksoc is a neutral term, a generic, amateurish label; flexibility and experimentation being two of the aims of this collective, each issue has it's own title: Zombie Birdhouse, Hardcore Whimzies, Kersjnikbiknjik, Frontal Lobotomy, Crisp Whores.

Due to the number of contributors to each magazine, Zombie Birdhouse and Hardcore Whimzies contain the least narrative stories in the sample. Long stories were not required and in fact discouraged by the necessity of including more artists in each issue. In addition, the initial informality of Komiksoc productions meant that long-term projects were unusual. Rather, single isolated short works were drawn, with long breaks of time between issues. Changes in the work of each artist are therefore marked.

Contact between Bitterkomix and Komiksoc produced some changes in Komiksoc after Kersjibiknjik, notably an attempt at more conventional comics, with speech balloons and sound effects. Tighter, cleaner work for its own sake was already an issue with Komiksoc artists after the first publication. The shock occasioned by the unfamiliarity of work, after the intervention of the printing process, was inducement to improve legibility. A printed page differs in texture from a handworked one - the medium of communication is subtly changed. Artists have to deal with issues of professionalism, as well as the expectations of an audience already conditioned to certain comic conventions used in regular comics.

Komiksoc's comics are whimsical and fantastical. Bitterkomix are realistic in the sense that constant references are made to politics and literature and art and cultural traditions, which are real-world items. Komiksoc's jokes are fanziney in-jokes [Total Disintegration of A fig 1; The Killing of Bunion fig 37]. Asides are either 'pure' jokes, cartoony and almost Disneyish, or so personal that the humour is incomprehensible to any but the artist.

Komiksoc really only gained confidence with Kersjibiknjik. Previous publications had a few outstanding stories, but none of Kersjibiknjik's unity and control.

For many of the contributors Zombie Birdhouse was their first attempt at comics and they had little awareness of the possibilities open to them. Hence my Odlid, with strict continuous narrative from frame to frame, and Tripping by Sididis (Philip Heimann), where pictures merely illustrate. In Odlid the pictures do add to the text, providing an eerie surreal atmosphere to a very simple storyline, and supplying details that are not mentioned in the story. Odlid is a first-time experiment in comics that does not quite look like a comic. I used brush and ink rather than the cleaner pen and ink, the result being that the drawings are far from a conventional comic style. Odlid's dreams are of

TOTAL DISINTEGRATION

OF



THE AMAZING SEQUEL TO LIELOW

A GOIL PUSHED TOO FAR,

TOO NEAR TO THE BRINK OF **DEATH!**

WATCH **S** DISMEMBER **REAL MALE BODIES** WITH A SCREW DRIVER

WATCH **S** DRIVE FAST KARS

WATCH **S** HANDLE A MACHINE-GUN-NUKE-GRENADE-LAUNCHER (with PUMPING action)

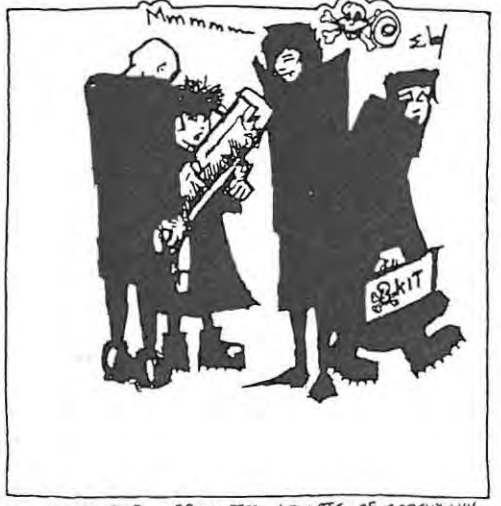
WATCH **S** SLEEP EVER SO CUTEY IN A WARM BED WITH **NOTHING** BUT HER TEDDY BEAR

WATCH **S** RIP OFF MALE **GENITALIA** AND FEED THEM TO HER ARMY OF **RABID RATS**

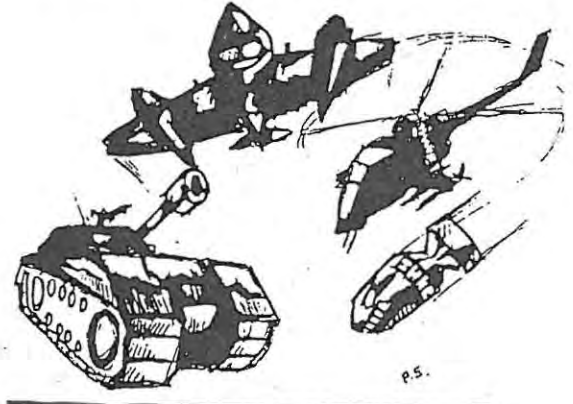


Fukk THIS SHIT





TO JESSIE B. FROM PETE WID LOTS OF GOOCHY WVV AGH, PUKK



HOW TOTAL RETALIATION!! TOTAL ANNIHILATION!!

Figure 1 Sorfa Total Disintegration of A

a largely static nature and he gives up in disgust, with no speech bubbles and no movement, having said or done nothing of any consequence. Each frame is a frozen moment: transitions between them are subject-to-subject transitions, so that essentially nothing happens in the story (which is what the story is about).

By being almost entirely concerned with the formal problems of narrating a story through pictures, I avoided some of the obvious pitfalls of an untrained comic artist by not trying to imitate other comics. An example of this particular disaster is Jeremy Franklin's comic After the Plagues [fig 2].

This account of a post-apocalyptic warrior's journey borrows so much detail, as well as the context and rationale of the story, from well-known science fiction comics, that there is ultimately no reason for the artist to have produced this imitation. It adds nothing to the genre. Moreover, in copying the details and the appearance of a comic, he failed to pay attention to the construction of a narrative. This fragment of work has nothing to hold it together, even from frame to frame, and reading it is difficult as well as pointless. John Hodgkiss's Frame the Mouse [fig 3] copies some of the surface details of conventional comics. Indeed, the whole story reveals the authors' familiarity with comics. Yet he borrows only what is appropriate to his own story, rather than constructing his work around a series of plagiarisms. He borrows for the sake of clarifying what he wants to say, instead of finding something to say as a vehicle to display his skillful borrowings.

My second attempt, in Hardcore Whimzies, recognises the failings of Odlid, in particular that it was not much like a comic. This time I use pen and ink, attempting to achieve a cleaner, more professional look.

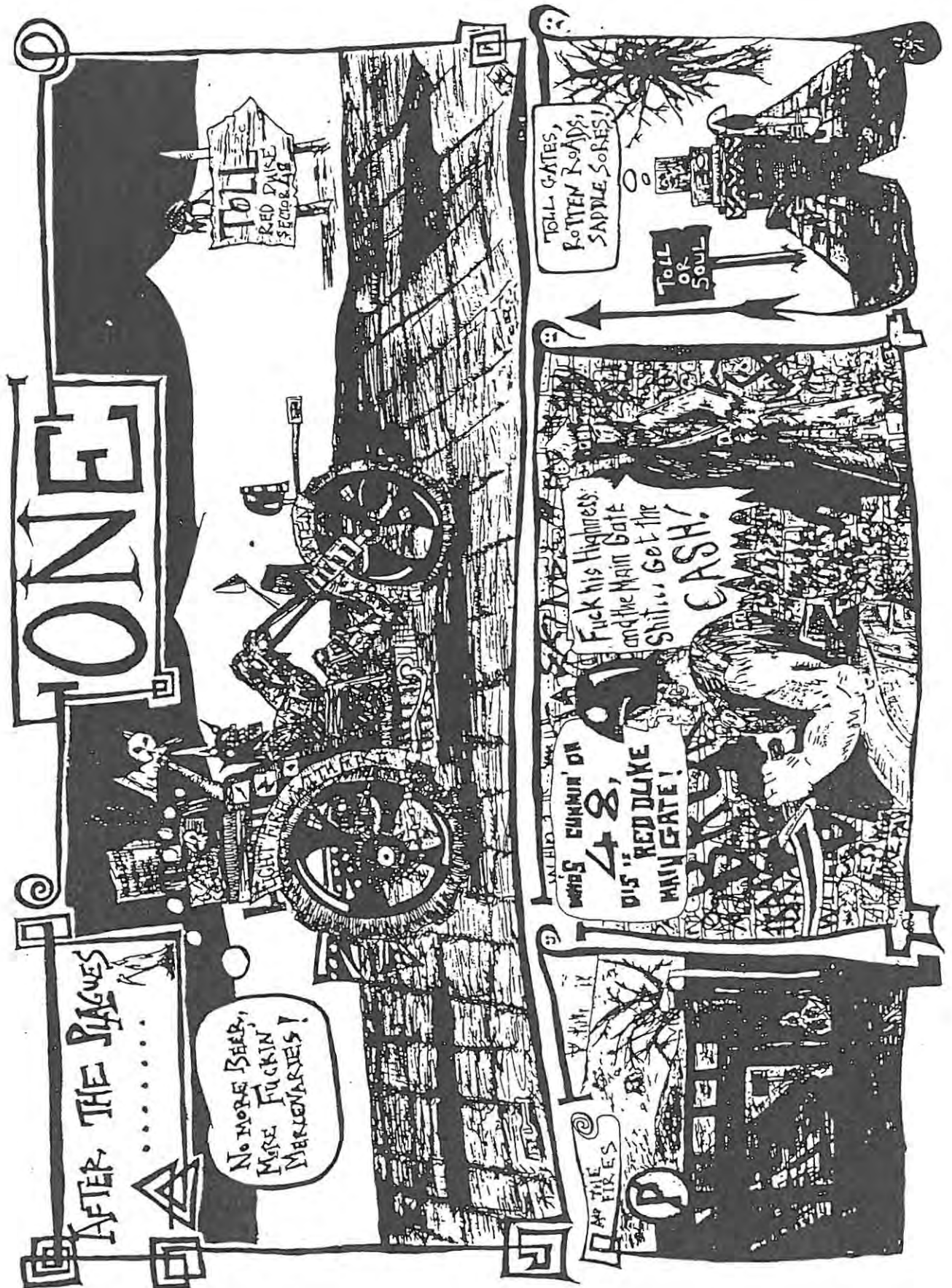


Figure 2 Franklin After the Plagues p1

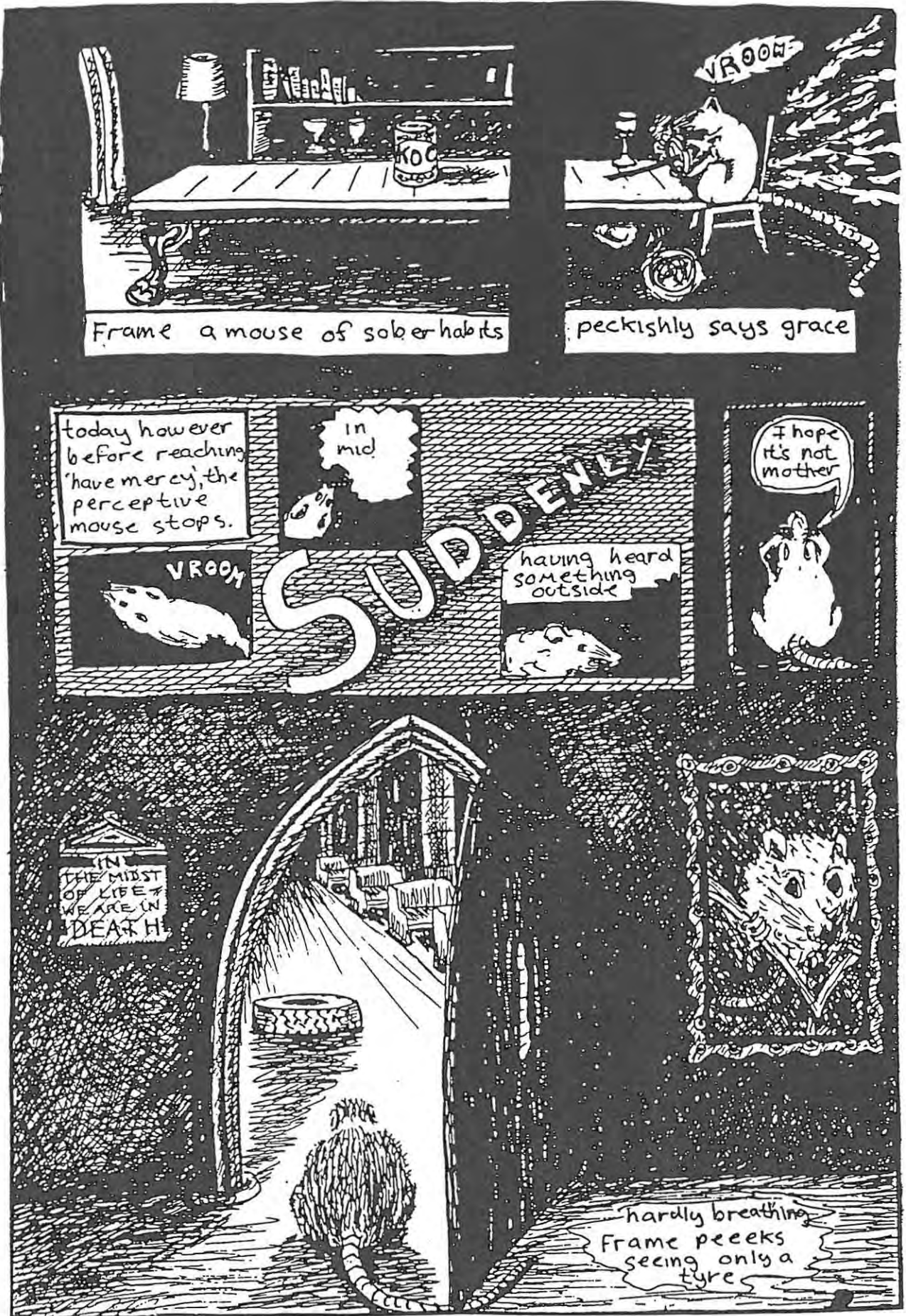


Figure 3 Hodgkiss Frame the Mouse p3

I illustrate a song lyric; in this one-pager, almost the only thing reminiscent of comics is the sequentialism of the pictures. Many later Komiksoc comics follow this pattern, being not a story but what Petr Sorfa calls a visual poem. The pictures try to interpret both the sense and the mood of the words. The consequent concern with lettering verges on becoming calligraphy, a tendency further exploited in *Kersjnibiknjik*, the next publication. It also illustrates a tendency common to fine art students working in comics: having no story to relate, the comic is in danger of becoming merely decorative. This page is an exercise in 'transitions' [McCloud, 1994, p.74], the movement between frames. Lettering appears in boxes, in frames, in the pictures, in the background, between frames, and is the subject of the comic. By varying the sizes of the gutters (the gaps between frames) and allowing the lettering to run on across the gutters, I attempted to control the rhythm of the page, and illustrate tangibly a feeling of disintegration. The second half of the page [fig 4] does achieve this almost by accident and ineptitude. *Ourselves Apart* demonstrates a very hesitant appropriation of comic tools.

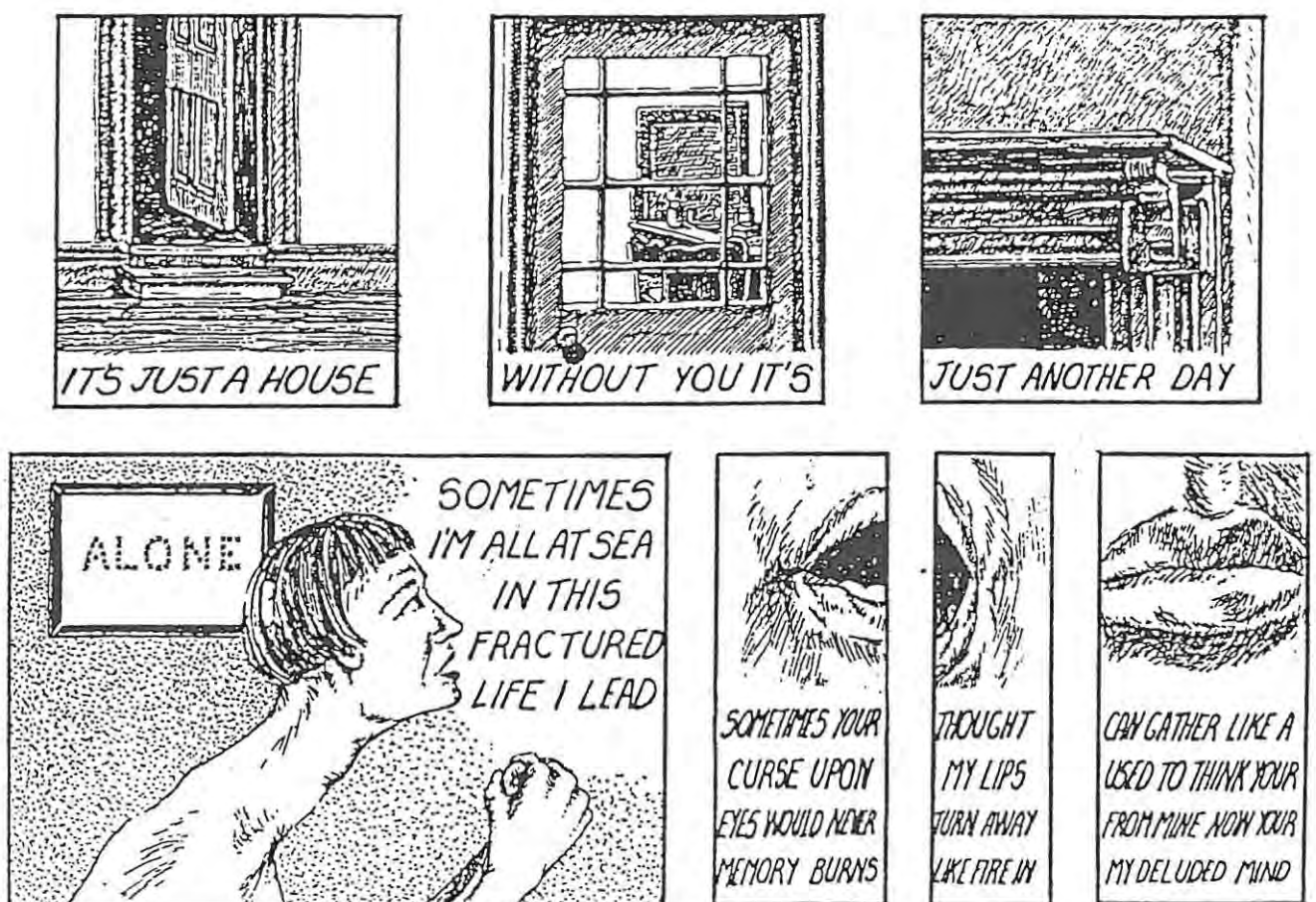


Figure 4 Breytenbach *Ourselves Apart*

Sididis's Tripping uses comic conventions with facility, due to his familiarity with comics. The page layout rather than the flow of words leads the eye. He even uses arrows to direct the reader. Whereas I relied on unfinished sentences to convey continuity, Sididis's pictures do so [fig 5]. It appears to be an unsuccessful story, in that he is trying to convey a drug-induced state of mind; his drawings are literal, not psychedelic. In a way this works, because the action to action transitions between frames describe a mood, and what is perceived to be narrative is revealed as description. This is unusual, but appropriate to an altered perception of reality, where a mood becomes an action and visions become things.



Figure 5 Sididis Tripping p1

There is evidence in Tripping of a problem common to most of Sididis's comics. The page is crowded, with no obvious reason for being so. Although much attention and effort is put into the plan of the layout, it is executed lazily so that much of its clarity and therefore force is lost.

A comparison to Bitterkomix's Tommy Saga is useful. Tripping is surprisingly flat for an illustration of such a loaded sensory experience, while The Tommy Saga crawls with allusions and juxtapositions. Not to say that this is the only way to draw a psychedelic experience - Petr Sorfa's Amorphous Picknick [figs 20,21] story seems to convey a similar

mood simply through large blank spaces, and Morai also expresses an altered perception of reality through tense, light, linear drawing. But Sididis's work is at once too heavy- and too light-handed, demonstrating the importance of an element of tension and particularly balanced tension in a successful work.

His is not simply a problem of layout, but an all-pervasive one of composition. Squelch [fig 6] loses much of its power, in fact loses the punchline of the joke because of its cluttered frames. The baby in the bag makes noises, but the sounds do not read as coming from the baby, if they are seen at all. The artist tries to convey detail, especially texture, at the expense of essential information. This is a beginner's mistake, a mistake in drawing.

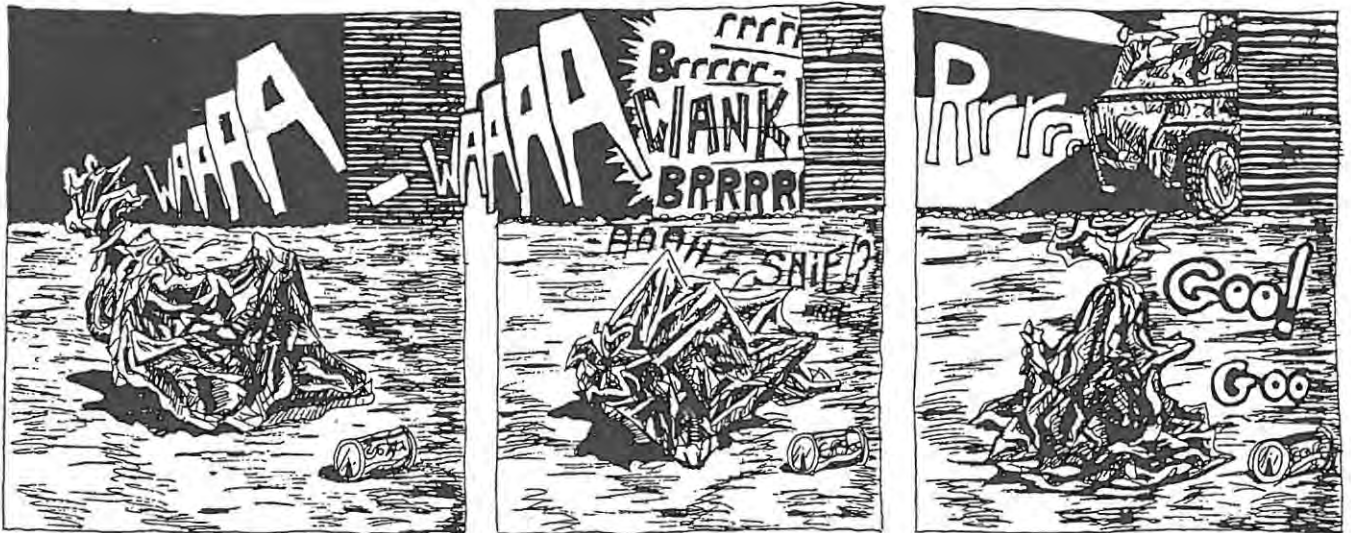


Figure 6 Sididis Squelch

In Hardcore Whimzies, The ID Chronicles deals with this problem initially, in that single moments are depicted, rather than whole scenes. Action is presented in a fragmentary way, a roving microscopic approach that focuses on vital information only. Frames show heads, hands and feet. It is not realistic at all, but paces the story speedily. A single cry can be drawn, in a speech bubble [fig 7], alone in a frame for emphasis. This is a good

example of how the appearance of a speech bubble can influence the kind of sound represented. The style of writing, the 'typeface', also gives clues as to the tone of voice. In figure 8 the sound becomes the subject of the frame even more substantially; the sound effect is the explosion.



Figure 7

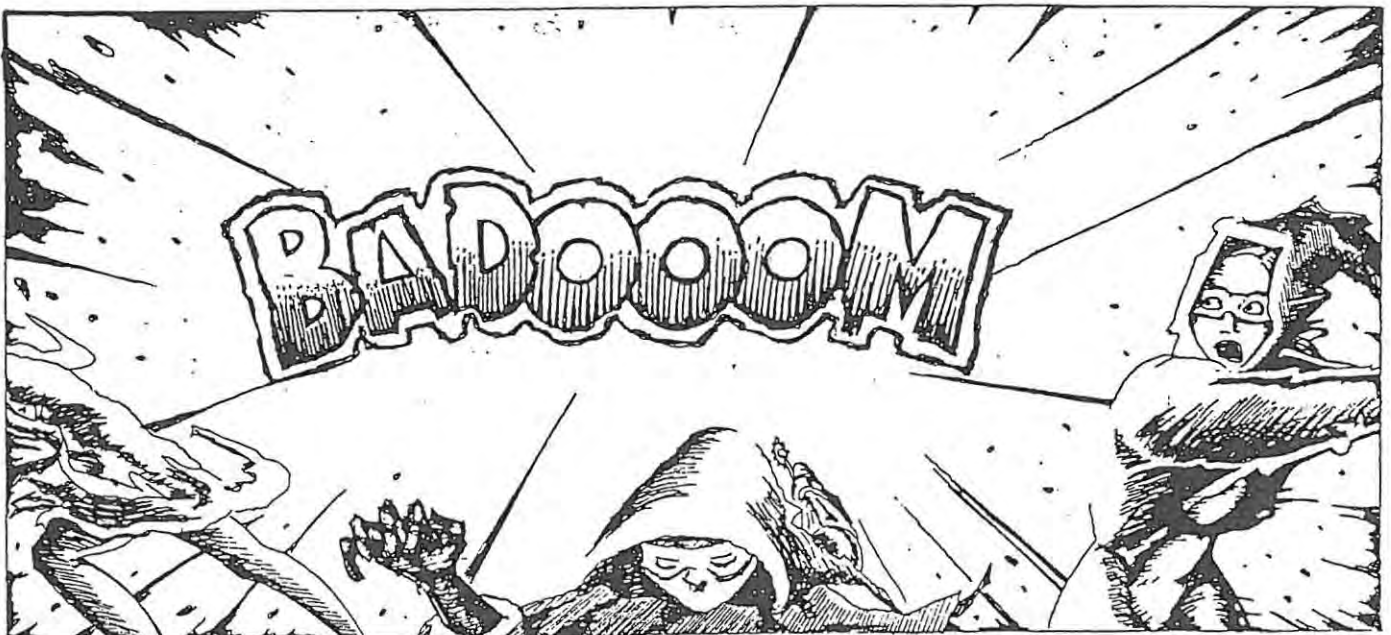


Figure 8 Sididis The ID Chronicles p3

Clearer areas of space are used, and line describes form and texture as well as shape. The drawings are stylized; Sididis seems to be more comfortable explicitly imitating a standard comic format than trying to find his own style of representation, and thus having to work from reality as a reference. Imitating what is acceptable in other comics also allows him the freedom to use comic conventions more easily than the other Komiksoc artists.

But Sididis loses his hold on the story in the last two pages. On the penultimate page he tries to depict a full page scene of destruction. Relying too much on the narrative to carry the story, neither the text or the box holding it are visually balanced with the drawing. The orientation of the page is rotated, in an attempt to enlarge the format of the frame. The last page again relies largely on narrative, but this time is more successful because the narrative box occupies an equivalent space to that of the picture.

Another reason for the loss of quality in the last two pages is the disappearance of the well-organized black and white spaces he starts with; the pages read as uniformly grey. Solid areas of black and white, judiciously arranged, can be crucial in determining the flow of a story, as they direct the reader's attention and the pace at which the page is read.

Petr Sorfa's Elephants [fig 9] is grey and freeform. Although he does not use strong blacks the comic is saved from obscurity by the open spaces around each unframed frame. It seems almost as if the reader can choose his or her own direction of reading, as the drawings are not rigidly placed; yet the whole is constructed on horizontal bands. It is the organisation that is arresting, although the information contained in the drawings is almost swallowed by their complexity and similarity of texture.



SO THE SENTIMENTAL
BLOOD WAVED NOT WITHOUT
A TEAR

A CASUAL
RESPONSE TO
DISCARD THE
BRAIN. MY
FINGER NAILS
ARE CLEAN

I OPENED THE ~~THE~~ FOOL AND
PLAYED 'THREE BLIND MICE' ON HIS
CRUMBLING GNASHERS
(WE MUST HAVE OUR FUN
NOW AND THEN).

TAKING THE
FACTORY
PRODUCT OUT
OF THE CRIBBLE
OF PRODUCTION
HO HUM.

AND THE MAN
AWOKE. NOT
FOR LONG THOUGH
THAT BODY IS
A REAL HEAP.

IT IS A MANY I DO TONIGHT THE
WORLD BREEDS TWICE AND THRICE.
LOVE IS NOTHING BUT AN INFECTION
OF THE BRAIN. I REFLECT ON
ALCHOLI AND FOOD.

P.S.
SMALL MAN'S DRAWING PAGE 2/E

Figure 9 Sorfa Elephants p2

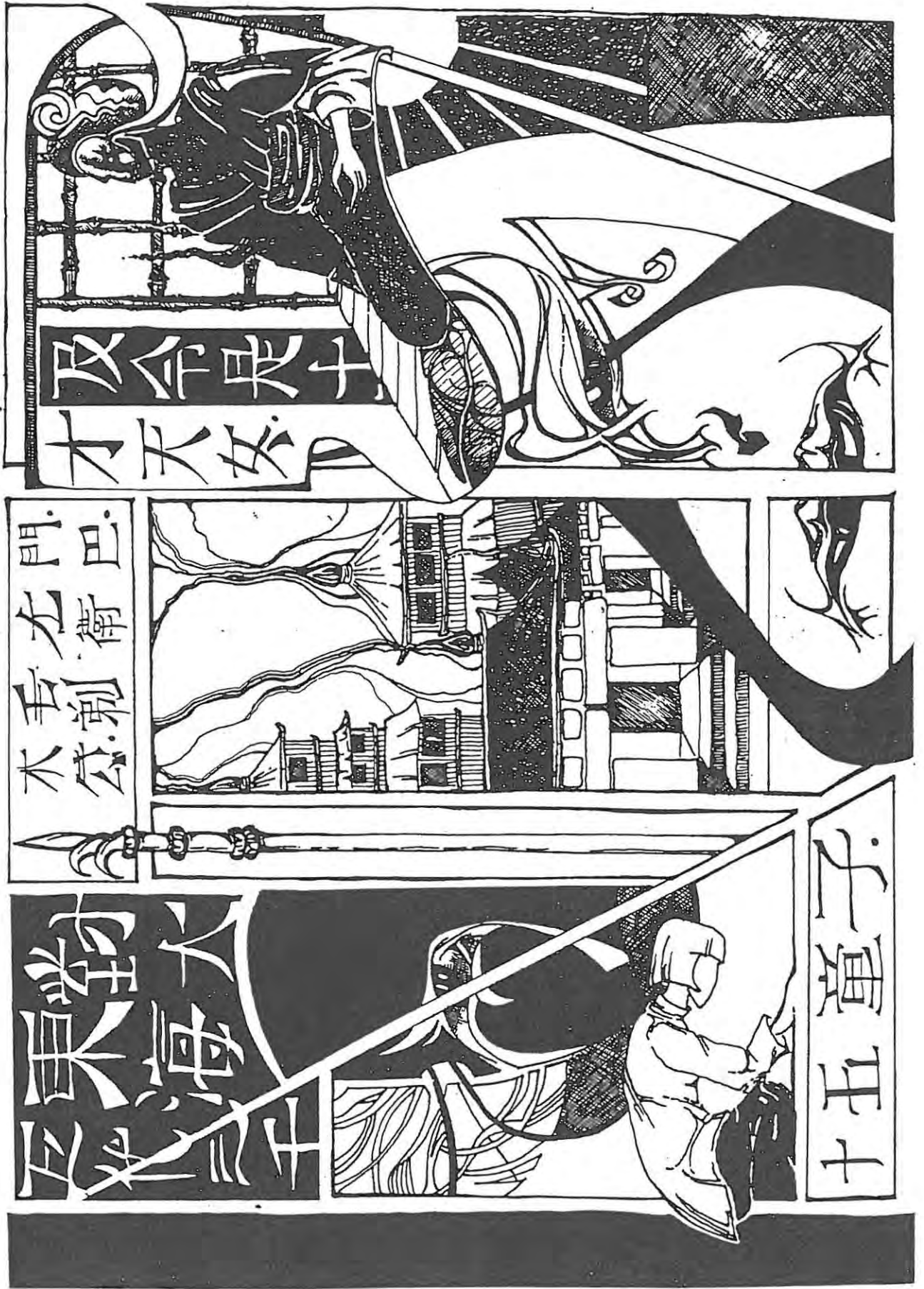


Figure 10 Sorfa (untitled)

The artist only solves this problem in the next comic, Kersjnibiknjik, when he switches to drawings with a minimum of tonal detail. He recognises what is arresting about his presentation and expands it, until the clear spaces of silence are the body and subject of his work. The Japanese page in Hardcore Whimzies [fig 10] is an indication of these possibilities. The entire page is patterned in almost solid blacks and whites. Two possible horizontal orientations, perpendicular to each other, are provided and frames flow in and out of each other, over the gutters. This comic is design and drawing for its own sake, with writing (acknowledged to be purely decorative) running all over the page. The style of drawing is very much imitative of Japanese comics, and the mood, explained in contemplative scene-setting frames, as well. The irony is that there is no plot, no scene to be set, just a single meaningless moment of inaction, a potentiality.

Kersjnibiknjik contained only work by Sorfa and myself, the core members of Komiksoc. The cover [fig 11] is both a parody of, and a homage to classic comic covers, yet not to the extent of Bitterkomix's covers, which are more studious parodies. It bears some resemblance to Pop Art, specifically the paintings of Lichtenstein, betraying the fine art background of the artist (myself), and some of the aspirations involved in the creation of the comic. The face on the cover is androgynous and idealized, both qualities which are typical of Komiksoc's work. The editorial warns readers that these are "not typical 'comic' spreads."

The first story, Baby Goth Fantasies, is one of my own. It is an essay on the disillusionments that accompany entry into a subculture, depicted through the vehicle of a fantasized relationship.

Each frame is separate, and each one linked to one sentence [fig 12]. The pictures' contents are strictly illustrative, containing added detail but not really expanding on the

КЕЯЏИВІКНІК



Figure 11 Breytenbach Cover of Kersjnibiknjik

text. Yet the frames function in such a way that they are more like visual translations of the text than illustrations of it. The drawings are almost verbal. The last frame is like a paragraph, with all the background figures being sentences qualifying the (visual) text [fig 12].

Detailed drawing, with fine hatching, is often superimposed on flat decorative backgrounds, and these are the most arresting frames. These decorative frames take over the role that writing plays on the first page, where several typefaces are used to demonstrate the progression of the plot, such as it is.

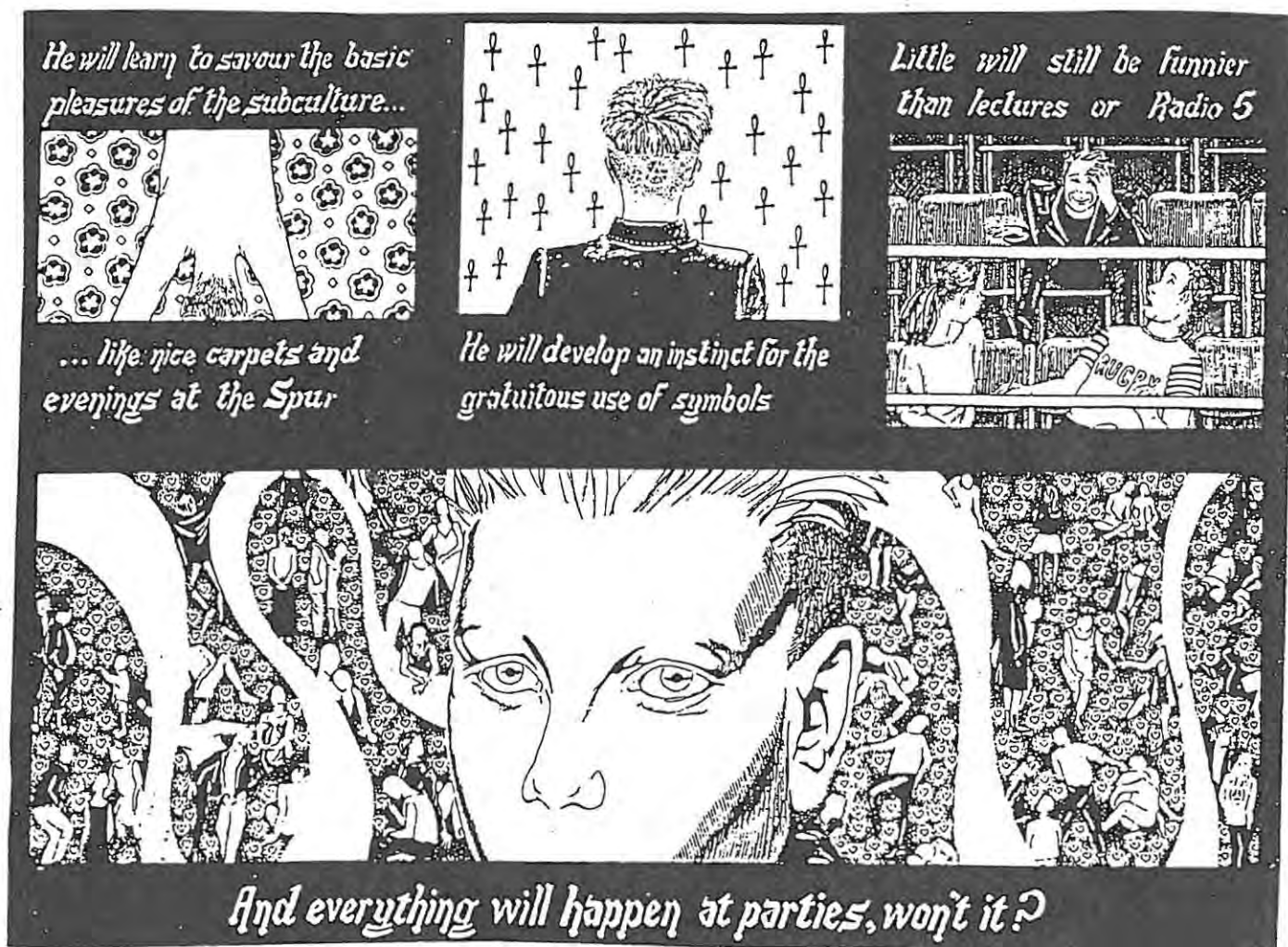


Figure 12 Breytenbach Baby Goth Fantasies p2

The first frame is a frame solely of text, a subheading; it leads into three pictorial frames, but the rest of the page is text. Text replaces illustration completely in two frames, [fig 13] which are a fusion of the traditional frame and the narrative box.

Lettering reflects tone (the text is a spoken monologue, not just a narrative), as well as providing a subtle subtext to the text. In the two frames of writing the text and the background combine to amplify the meaning: the frame about self-mutilation has a background of razorblades, and the lettering imitates sharp metallic edges. In the second frame, about drugs, slightly psychedelic writing is superimposed onto a spiral background that resembles a maze or optical illusion. This technique is both illustrative and interpretative. The artist becomes more clearly a stylist.

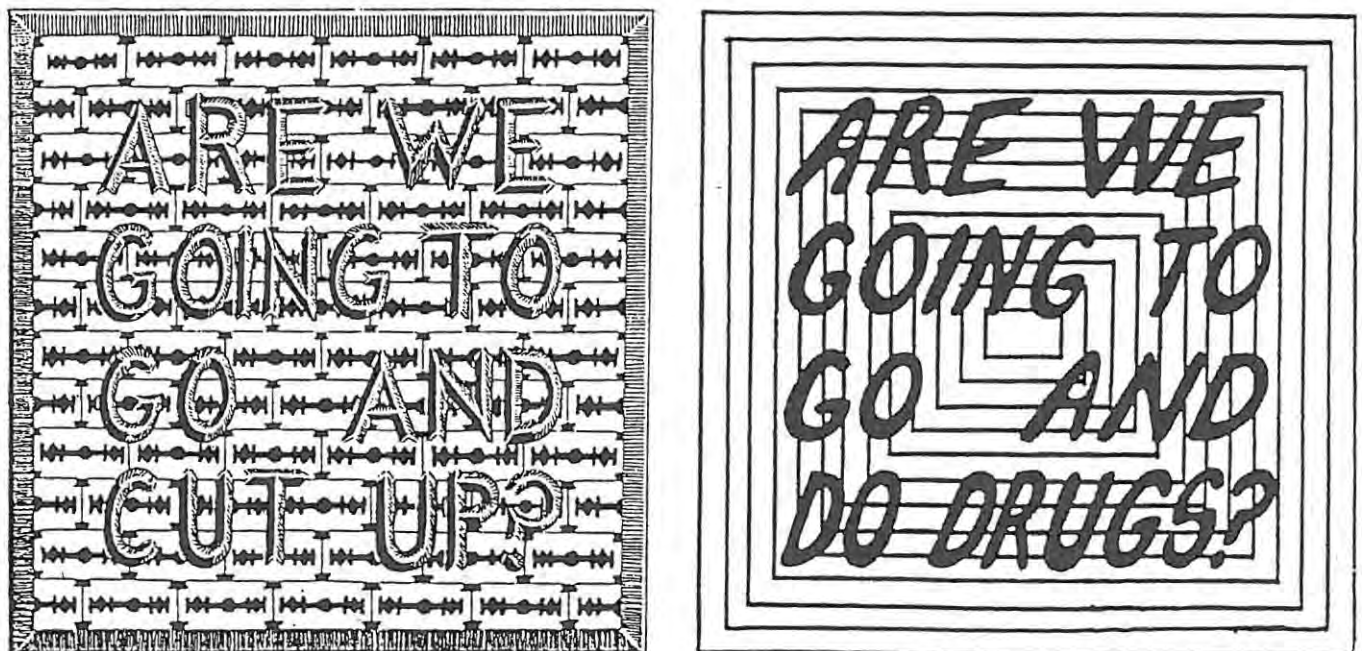


Figure 13 Breytenbach Baby Goth Fantasies p1

Page layout aims to control the pace of reading, here relying largely on variations in frame size to do this. The pace of this particular comic is reliant on the spoken rhythm

of the text, which is the reason for correspondence between frame and phrase taking precedence over close frame-to-frame transitions. This is a very rudimentary comic, which uses only a limited number of standard comic tools, and links between verbal and visual are easily seen. The visual aspects of a comic are its grammar, in as strict and controlled a sense as the grammar of a written text. The structure of the comic is not just aesthetic; it serves a very mechanical function, enabling clarity of expression.

The comic shows restraint: the drawings are almost over-literal, and yet the overall view is oblique. No blood is shown, although the script begs it at one point. In fact nothing specific is shown.

Teargas Me and I reveals a few more of Sorfa's influences, as this story partakes of a science-fiction genre known as cyberpunk. The leading female character is similar to the heroines of Love and Rockets [Hernandez, J. 1987] and Tankgirl [Hewlitt, Martin, 1989], both very influential to all the Komiksoc artists.

Knowledge of Japanese comics was apparent in his earlier comics, and here a simplified drawing style allows him to develop idealised, cartoon-like characters, without the idiosyncracies of feature so beloved of Bitterkomix. This occurs at almost the same time as a similar tendency appears in my own work, also a result of a search for clear and concise expression.

Sorfa frequently uses blank backgrounds: only the essential components of the story are shown clearly, with no amplification and no symbolism, merely illustration. The style is reminiscent of the photographic simplification of Love and Rockets. It is a linear rather than a tonal style, with little background detail. When he does depict backgrounds, the frames become confusing. Details essential to the plot (in this case the throwing of a

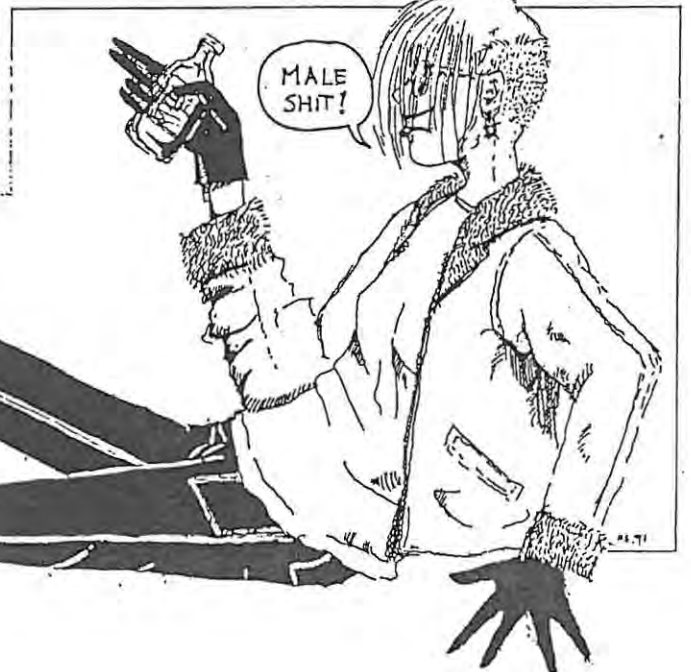
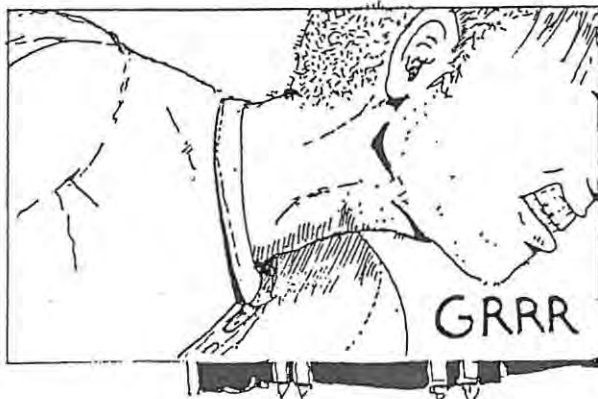
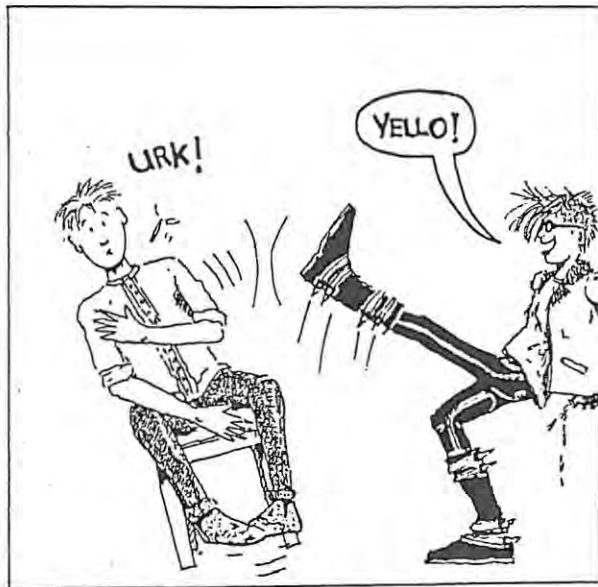


Figure 14 Sorfa Teargas Me and I p2

bomb) are lost in an attempt at perspective and realistic detail. Closely focused-on actions are represented best.

Most of the story is concerned with action depicted in closed single moments. He uses these transitions not just to advance action but to adjust the focus in each minimal scene, producing a concentration on single elements that is dizzying. The fight scene [fig 14] is economically depicted in classic comic style, with sparse, relevant motion lines, and is the best example of this focusing technique. Closeups of parts act as punctuation, causing a pause at the bottom of the page and a breather in the fight scene, after the action-filled complete-view panels of the fight.

The figures illustrate the action rather than themselves, due to frequent overlapping and cropping. This considered selectivity is part of efficient narration.

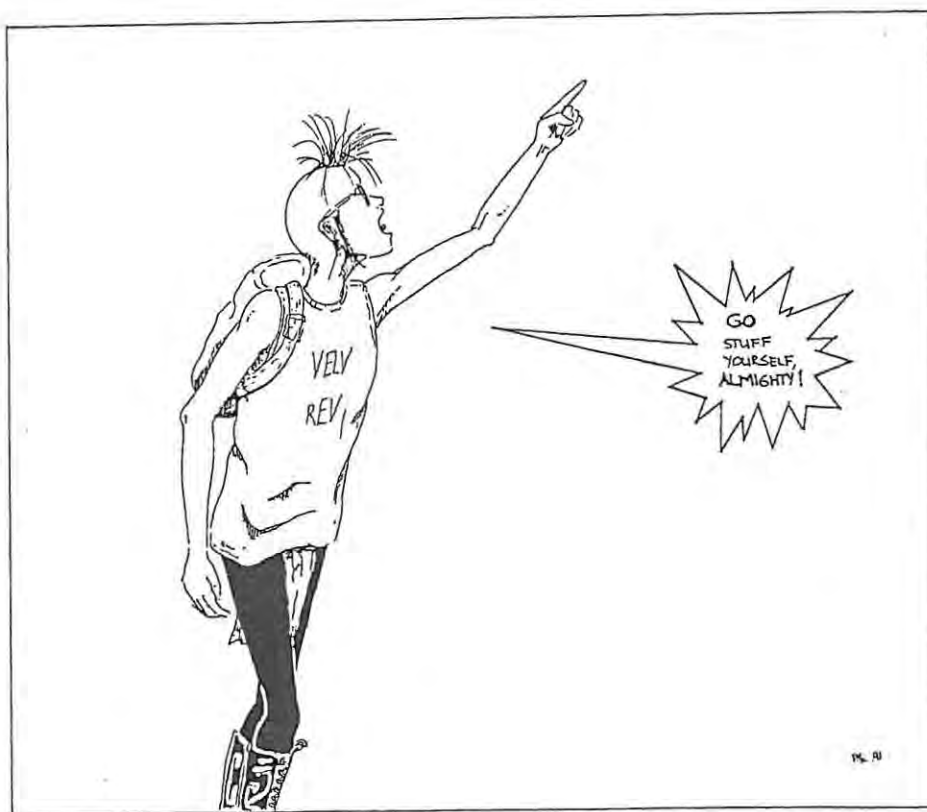


Figure 15 Sorfa Teargas Me and I p6 (reduced)

In the last frame [fig 15] the main character stands alone against a blank background. The frame is classically composed. Visually it reads like a punchline, but the text is ambiguous, as if part of the script has been left out. The script as a whole is bitty and unclear, lacking motivation. This is not necessarily a problem in itself, but the comic is drawn as if possessing a clear, functional narrative, and there is no apparent reason for this failure at the end.

The lettering is amateurish, sloppy, and uncomfortable, which ruins the finish of the comic. Solid areas of black, used frequently, mitigate the tentative sensitive lines, producing through contrast a visual liveliness that quickens the pace of the action.

Last Week is, at this point, my longest story. It is a prose passage rather than a narrative; the form of the text is that of a letter, addressing a specific person directly.

The title page is one panel. Each subsequent page is divided into roughly equivalent sections, which are then subdivided, either into separate frames or by means of text superimposed onto larger frames. Many of the devices used in Ourselves Apart are used again.

For its effect the comic relies on an accumulation of details, and all the parts are completely interdependent. Various disparate elements are thrown together. Quotes are added in to supplement the text, creating an expression of an emotional state, rather than a message. It is a flat comic, in the sense that the tone remains even throughout and the pace does not change. Each frame is an elaboration of the mood of the text, and text and pictures are equivalent, having the same weight. Some frames are purely text [fig 16]. The meaning lies more in the design or layout than in a narrative. Instead of clearly stating my intentions, or even alluding to them, I embroider around them. It is a dissection of

a single emotion, depicting various angles and various states of the same helplessness. The patterned backgrounds are as important and as clear as the foregrounds. Some of the frames are almost emblematic [fig 17].

Cropping gives the effect of obsessive concentration on details, and not always the apparently relevant ones, creating a focussed yet oblique view, appropriate to a story about obsession [fig 18].



Figure 16 Breytenbach Last Week p2 (reduced)



Figure 17 Breytenbach Last Week p3



Figure 18 Breytenbach Last Week p2 (reduced)

There are characters, but their presence is felt rather than seen, just as the relationships between them are implied rather than stated. All we see of the speaker is her feet.

The comic is claustrophobic. No environment is created, and there are no details that would help to contextualise the events. Sorfa works in a similar manner in order to communicate facts and actions clearly; the aim in my comic is entirely different, namely to express abstract qualities such as emotion as literally as I can. There is no depth in the drawing. Where perspective is possible it is cancelled out by cropping, chopping, or decoration. Yet despite this even state, the page is never at rest. The execution is nervous. It is not a comic but a borderline comic.

The first comic of mine to resemble a conventional comic is the last story in Kersjnibiknjik, a one-pager called Eddie Jumped [fig 19]. Like Odlid, my first comic, it is a completed story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Although the text is important, in terms of page layout the pictures dominate. The text is relegated to conventional text boxes.

Instead of the previous commonsense, logical layout, where frames were laid out like short sentences, the reader is directed to the crux of the action. A splash panel encloses the whole narrative. Placing of text boxes, particularly the last one ["though he nearly slipped"], dictate the changes in tone.

Again an oblique view is presented; the focus is on the boy, yet the true drama is the fate of the girl. The smiley face (a recognised symbol for LSD) and the photograph 'pinned' onto the page contextualise the event, but its causes remain mysterious. The story is about a relationship, or rather a single critical moment in a relationship. The length of the jump, the timing of it, and the entrails, are exaggerated, as the comic is



Figure 19 Breytenbach Eddie Jumped

more metaphorical than realistic, a reading supported by the cartoon-like appearance of the characters.

Frontal Lobotomy, the next comic produced by Komiksoc, contains work by Casey and Sididis, as well as Petr Sorfa and myself. Sorfa and I attempt to illustrate scripts by others as well as writing our own.

Sorfa's Amorphous Picknick is scripted by Morgan Mitchell, and is the first of a series of collaborations between them. It portrays a disturbingly incomprehensible moment, although the action in itself is not incomprehensible the way some of Bitterkomix's stories are.

It is sparse, both verbally and pictorially. The artist's control over his material has improved. The drawings are carefully composed of flat areas of solid black or white with a minimum of tonal detail [fig 20]. Photographic qualities are translated into linear terms, creating a clear, dreamlike atmosphere. Depth is suggested through overlapping and scale creating a somewhat flimsy illusion of reality. The pace is slow and lingering, with wordless frames and sharp detail.



Figure 20 Sorfa Amorphous Picknick p2 (reduced)

Content is sometimes allowed to escape the rigid boundaries of the frames. Transitions between panels are close, showing aspects of the same scene only slightly separated in time, creating an even continuity. Thus, seemingly unrelated frames at the beginning of the comic jar with this easy continuity. They seem to be providing a wider context for the events narrated in the main body of the story. The first page functions as a kind of scene-setter, with an apparently random cast of characters and locations. However, as the frame-to-frame transitions become tighter on the last two pages, the sense of realism, of a portrayal of actual possible events, increases. The pictures narrate, and the text supplies the atmosphere and emotional content. This is a reversal of the procedure normally used in this kind of surreal, poetic comic.

The text is almost like a list of slogans, each with its corresponding drawing, especially on the last page [fig 21]. These drawings do not directly illustrate the text; their placing in relation to the text links them with specific statements, demonstrating how sequentialism and juxtaposition can influence meaning.

The graffiti-like punchline at the end expresses the underground, irreverent aspect of the comic.

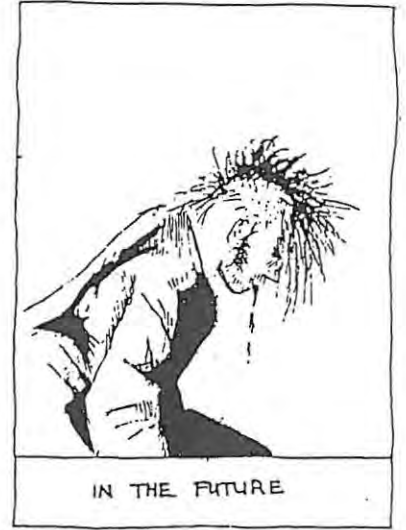
In contrast to Sorfa's increasing control, Sididis merely continues to repeat previous mistakes. CD-VD is rough, raucous, and over-ambitious. Text and pictures duplicate each other, to the detriment of both. Too many words, too many pictures, and too many details, makes the comic juvenile and self-indulgent. What appears to be the climax of the story, is, after extensive buildup, condensed to a crowded box of text. Although actions are illustrated accurately, individual frames are hard to decipher; the compositions are overcrowded and unfocused.



EVENTS PASS - -



FROM A STATE OF
POTENTIALITY



IN THE FUTURE



THROUGH THE PRESENT



TO A STATE OF FINALITY



IN THE PAST.



PARANOIA'S GOT THE
BEST OF US
GRAVITY'S GOT THE
REST OF US.

Sorfa's technique saves, lives up to and even surpasses his intentions. Sididis' does not. Confusion can be used purposefully, the way Casey does, but this is not what Sididis is trying to do. He is inarticulate and muddled, even though his vocabulary of comic techniques is extensive.

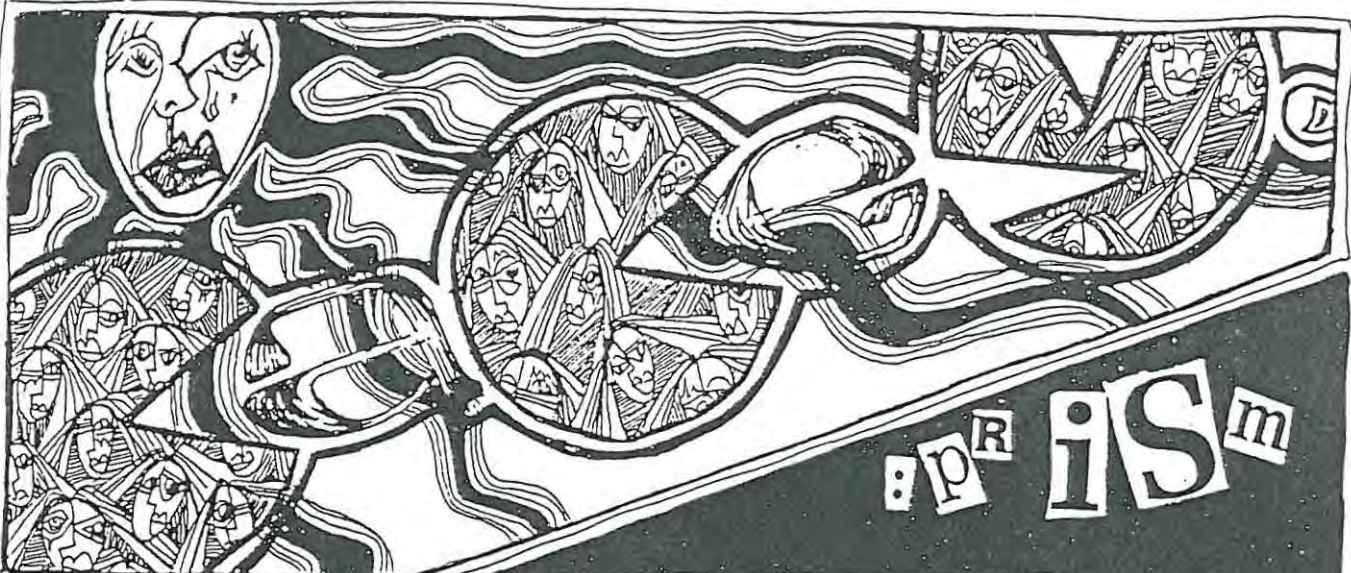
Similar both in theme and execution to my Last Week are Prism and Showcase, by Casey.

Prism [fig 22] is elegant in its simplicity. The decorative busyness of the pictures contrasts strongly with the typed lettering, isolated on a black ground, which gives nothing away. The juxtaposition of the two lends the drawings an emotional intensity that they would otherwise lack. Tension is created by the balance between the text and the pictures. Words contained within the frames are classic comic soundeffects, loosely handwritten; the typed text is not describing the action, merely commenting on it in poetic, almost archaic, language.

The drawings are stylized and linear, yet voluptuous and sensual at the same time. The idiosyncrasy of her style strengthens the story by making it appear more personal.

Showcase is like another episode of the same story. It is also a monologue by a female narrator, about love and victimization.

Showcase is more sophisticated and less literal, more allusive and elusive than Last Week.



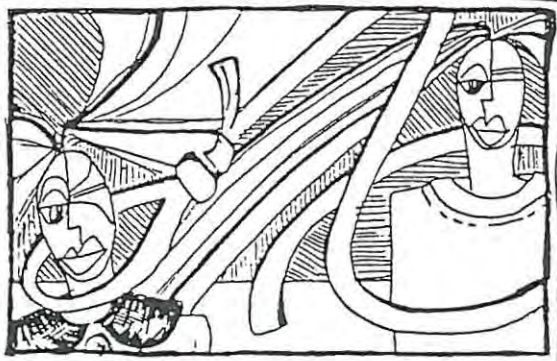
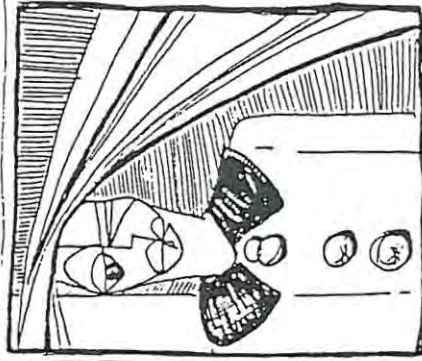
PRISM

BY
Casey

JULY

1991

you found me wayside,
battered and blackening



(from this self you drew
purples, blues, yellows)
and brushed from my coat the grit:
we walked shoulder to shoulder
plancing no further than our snuffling feet
(for a while)
then white was I
in the screaming sun
waiting (again) to scorn the next iarer
and you dissipated
almost
taking with you my palet.

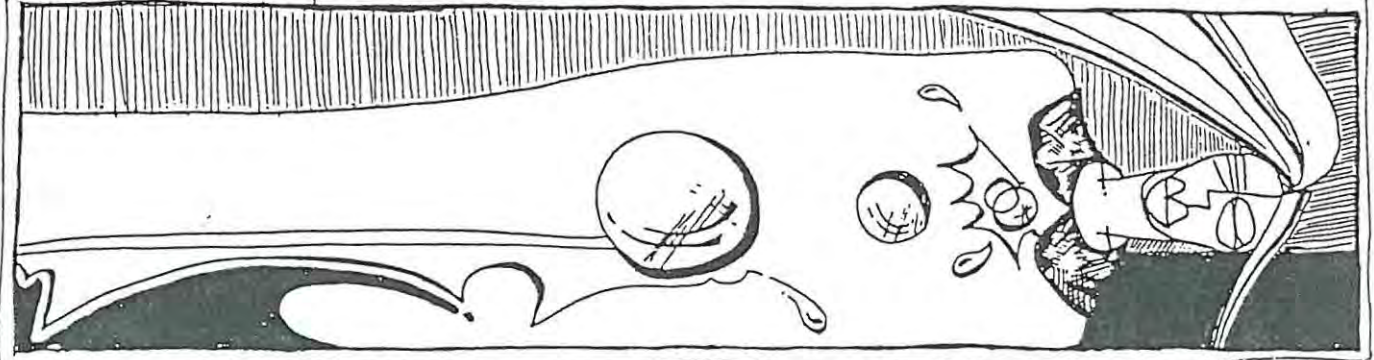
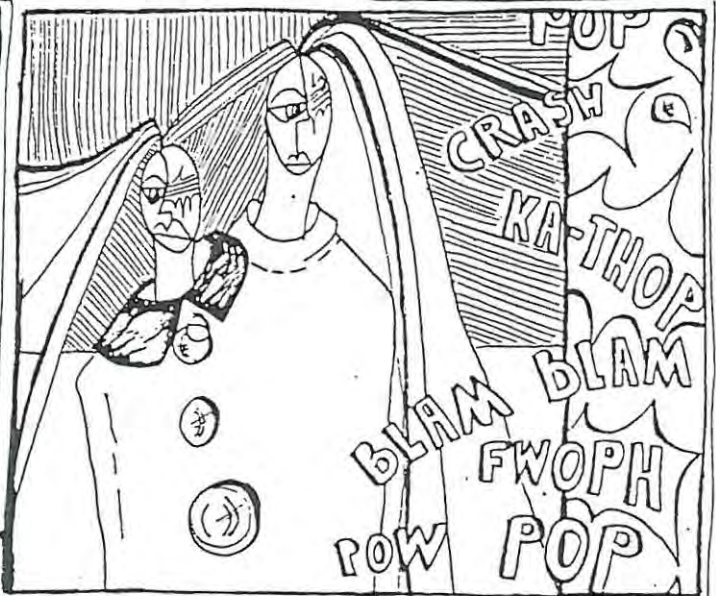


Figure 22 Casey Prism

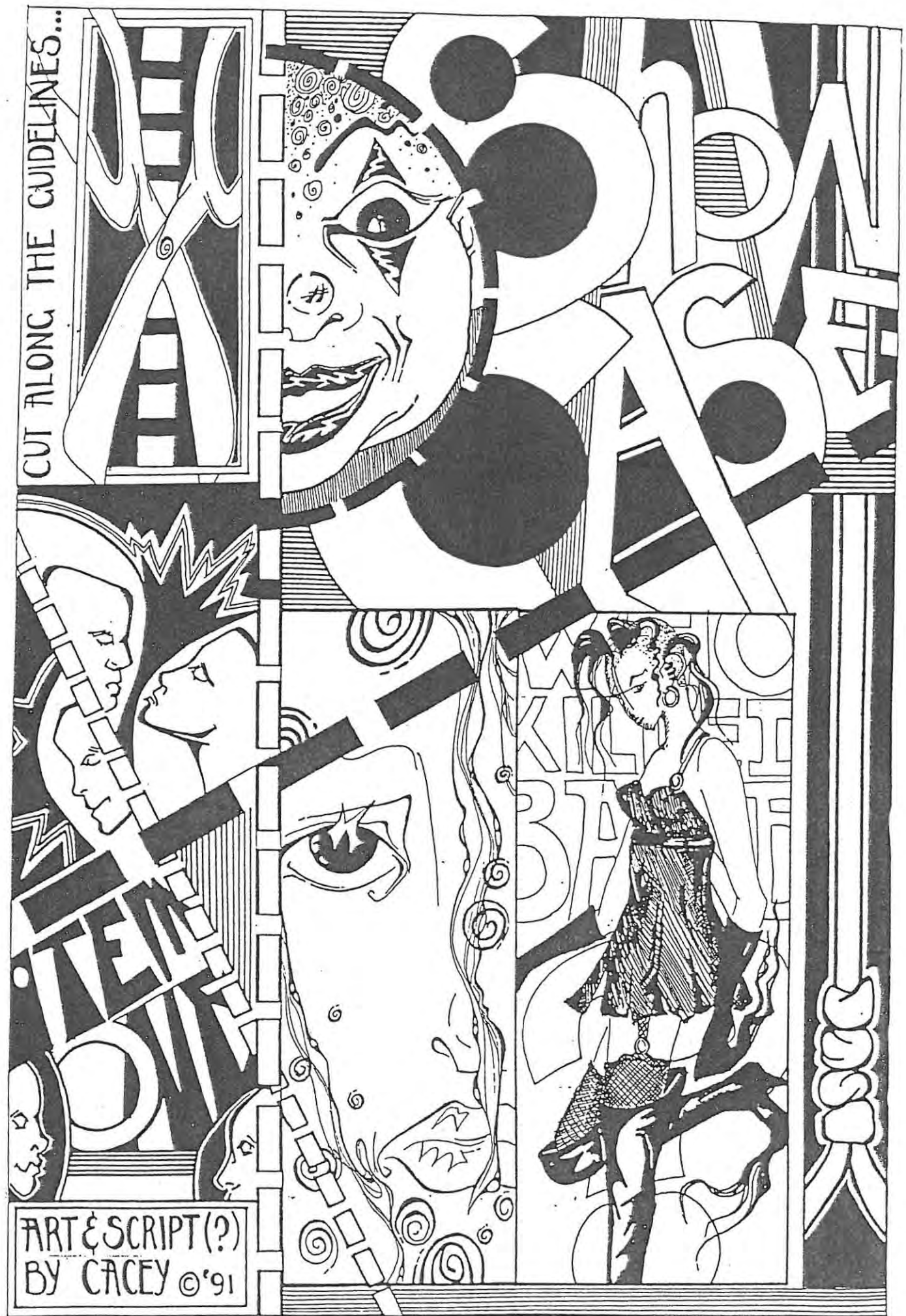


Figure 23 Casey Showcase: Item 1 p1

In Item 1 [fig 23] the meaning is effected by accumulation, of both pictures and a text that is frequently punctuated with snide asides. Repetition of motifs in details make them significant. The cut-along-the-guideline dots, the scissors, and the references to mutilation, are all part of the same motif, that accrue to become one of the main themes of the story, and symbolise emotions expressed in the story.

Item 1 is like an abstract of Item 2, a narrative about abuse, physical or psychological. Pictures and text intersect, touching at points, then diverging. Repetition forms a structure for the comic. The narrative is more verbal than visual, but the pictures illustrate elements from the text, and elevate them to the level of symbols. The cuts from Item 1 become scratches, inflicted by a monster [fig 24]. The imagery is fantastical and magical rather than surreal, linking with the slightly archaic language used. This is a literary comic, owing more to poetry than traditional comics, and instead of relying on conventional means of expression, the artist is forced to invent her own methods and structures.

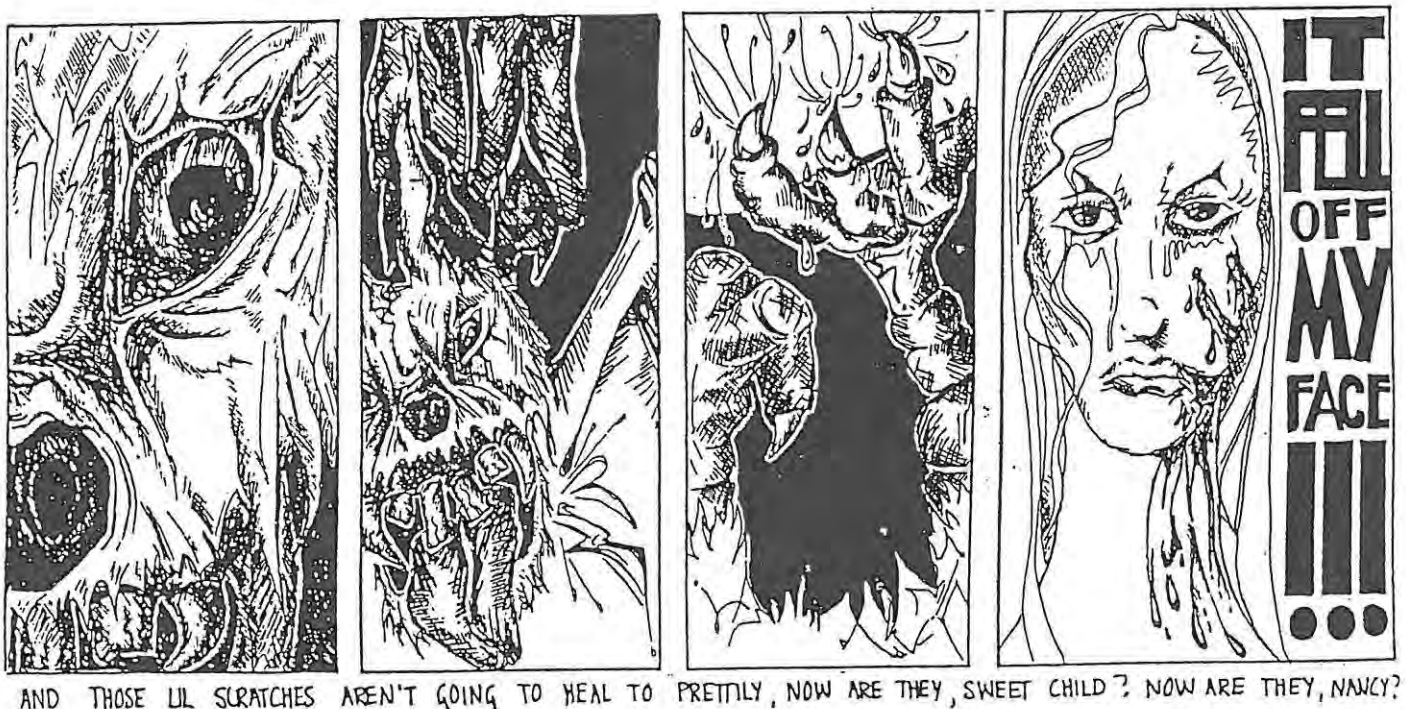


Figure 24 Casey Showcase: Item 2 p2

Two people, a scriptwriter and an artist, produced KRMLF. It is my first attempt at a 'real' comic, but is too decorative to succeed as one. The text is given a prominence it does not necessarily require. Although the writer was well-acquainted with the forms of comics, I was at this stage still ignorant of most of these; there is a clash of intentions between verbal and visual. The comic fails because it is too even in intensity and too tentative. The drama is not dramatic or exaggerated enough.

The pictures attempt sequential narrative, but are isolated from each other [fig 25]. Text is placed in the gutters, further separating the frames. The last and second last pages improve slightly, with closer transitions from frame to frame, but the first section shows no understanding of the mechanism of transition. I have not adapted my technique to suit a different style of narrative, or a different subject. In previous comics the pictures were closely allied to the text; they grew out of the same impulse. I added the last page onto the existing script, and it works more comfortably than the rest of the comic. It is laid out in terms of the grammar of the transitions, as it was conceived visually. Blacks and whites are used as punctuation, to direct the reader and for emphasis.



Figure 25 Breytenbach KRMLF p3



Figure 26 Sorfa Meeting a Swan p1

Sorfa's collaboration with scriptwriters continues in Meeting a Swan, a childlike, lyrical comic written by Lisa Loewenthal. The artificiality of the language is echoed in the surreality of the pictures, with classical architectural drawings in the background and whimsical characters.

On the first page [fig 26] the title and text are in boxes like frames, composed and decorated to look like pictures at first glance. This does not work technically, particularly in the text frame because the writing is hard to read. However, it is an interesting experiment in the construction of a page, examining the interaction between text and pictures; it tests the limits of the conventions governing their integration.

In Mary Gets Stoned [fig 27], I manage a conventional narrative successfully. The story is told through the character's speech and actions. It is a short anecdote in two pages rather than a full comic. But the instant is conveyed through action; the transition to the second page is the crux of the comic, even its point. The text is minimal, as are the drawings, so there is no distraction from the mechanism of the story. On the last page the text is placed so as to support the timing and pace of the transition, hence its impact. Solid blacks and whites are used to illustrate a change in time and meaning. The drawings are clear and bold, with little decoration.

The last comic produced by the Komiksoc group was Crisp Whores, as we disbanded when Sorfa completed his degree in 1993.

Sididis and Cacey reach a compromise in Dolly Does Techno - he pencils and she inks. It is a Cinderella ["Technorella!!"] story, and also a fairytale about toys coming alive. Although still subculture oriented, the emphasis has changed to that of techno, the emerging youth culture of the nineties.

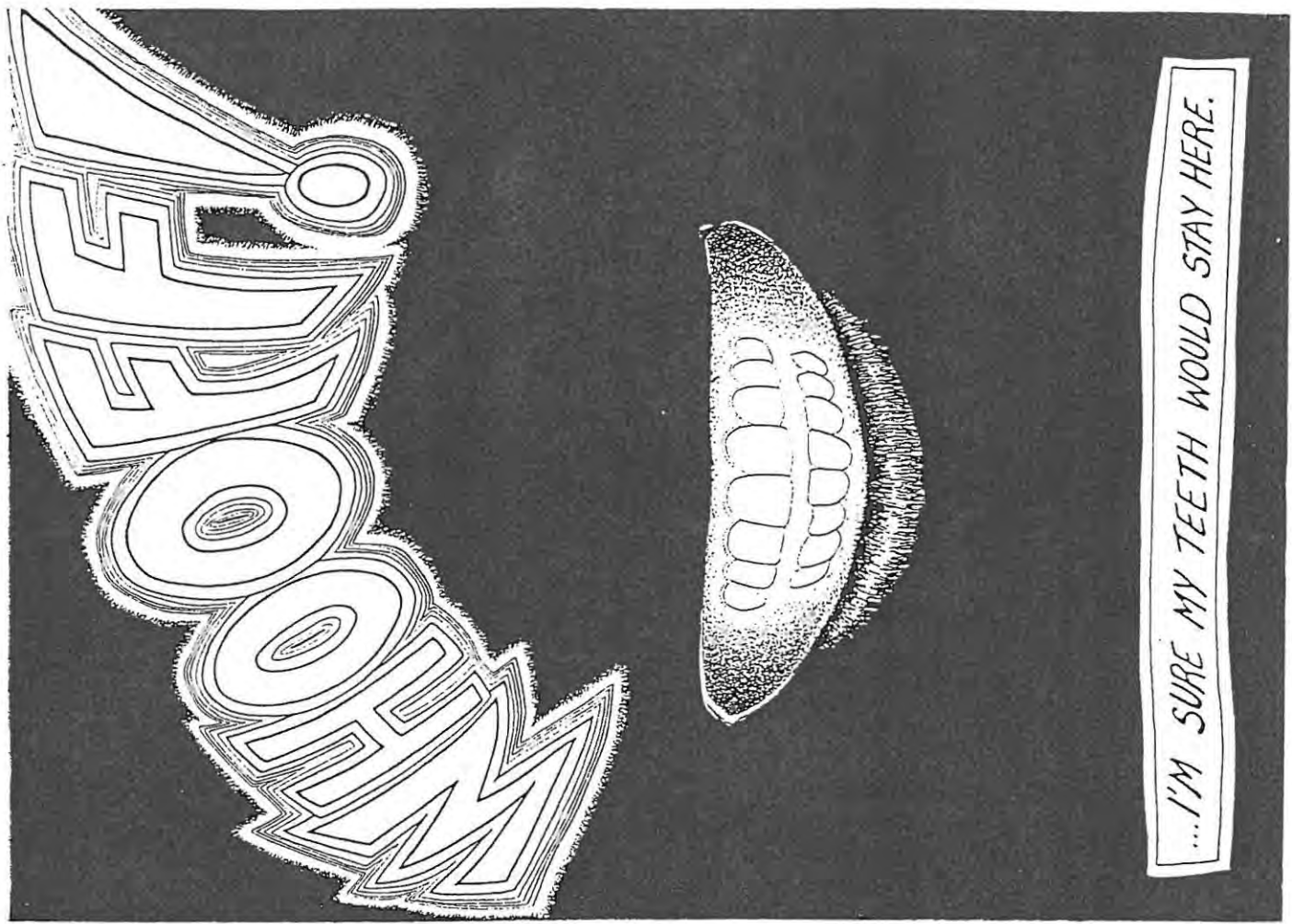


Figure 27 Breytenbach Mary Gets Stoned pp1 and 2 (reduced)

Casey's understanding of blacks and whites clears up Sididis's drawing, while his pencilling gives her work greater liveliness than before. In effect, she edits his work, giving greater prominence to some things than others.

While Bitterkomix and Morai's work seem to be aspects or episodes of the same world, admittedly the world particular to each artist, Komiksoc's artists are more experimental, choosing the style to suit the theme. Sometimes changes are radical, like Sorfa's change in style in Van Newman's Hot Coklit Cainer. While the permanent artists struggle to develop and maintain a style, their style is seldom the subject of their stories, as Bitterkomix's sometimes dense one-pagers are.

The thread of unintelligibility running through his work became more marked when Sorfa started illustrating other writers' scripts, producing a surreal, poetic, closed world. Paradoxically, the more cartoon-like his characters and the more surreal his scripts become, the more real and controlled his stories become.

Van Newman's Hot Coklit Cainer is the comic in which Sorfa finally finds his own style, one that suits his haphazard scripts. It is the most successful love story produced by Komiksoc, poignant and funny.

The artist is no longer reliant on outside reality; the comic has its own world. Almost mythological in scope and approach, its characters are fantastical creatures that are treated as if they are real. This development is partly due to his knowledge of comics, and the idea that 'anything can happen', as the comic's reality is extended to include more possibilities than before. A moody atmosphere is created through judicious use of blacks and whites, and only essential details are used to contextualise the story [Fig 28]. The lessons learned in Amorphous Picknick are strengthened. The characters belong

completely to the background, and to the environment. Instead of the background still containing references to and being bound by reality, it has the same substance as the cartoon characters. Furthermore, giving up all photographic realism allows Sorfa to use extra-verbal signs: the glowing heart, the cainder cracking open [Fig 29].



Figure 28 Sorfa Van Newman's Hot Coklit Cainer p2

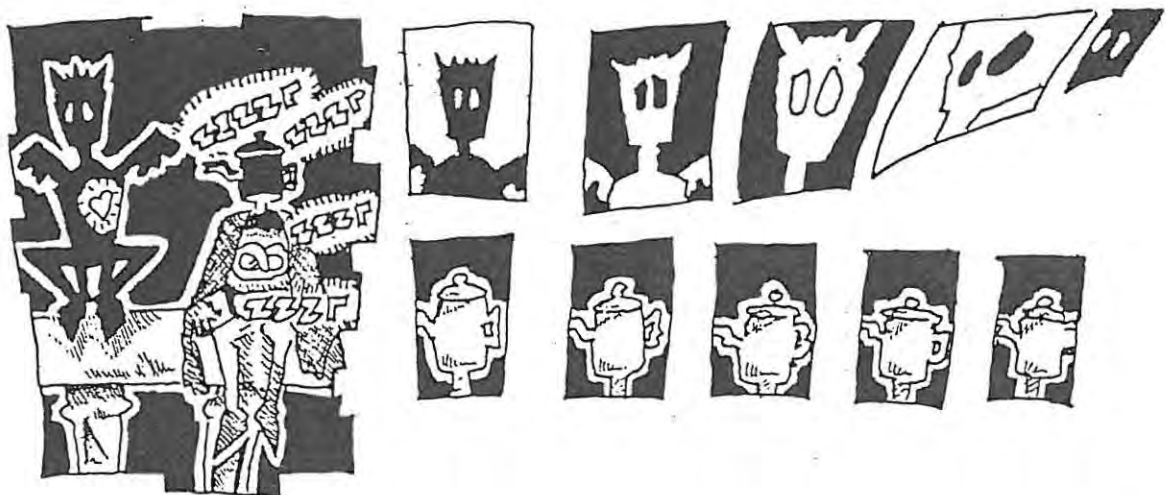


Figure 29 Sorfa Van Newman's Hot Coklit Cainer p4

From the whimsical, poetic scripts written by Loewenthal and Mitchell, Sorfa learns to play with language. His script does not obey the rules of grammar or spelling. Instead, the text reflects the confusion and surrealism of the drawings, where strange beings exist, and rules of perspective are warped (without being abandoned) [Fig 30]. Language has been stretched in order to express the nature of the speaker beyond mere characterisation. Lettering and spelling contextualise the narrator beyond what meaning alone can do.



Figure 30 Sorfa Van Newman's Hot Coklit Cainder p1

Transitions and action are managed and narrated visually because the comic is conceived visually. Blacks and whites are manipulated in such a way that the drawing often looks more like writing or signs than pictures. The drawings are equivalent in their evolution to the text: they are close to conventional reality, but mixed with comic conventions, and taken further on their own terms. Eventually the whole comic no longer works by rules other than its own. Elements in the story do not have to look like anything other than that they belong to the comic. Language makes sense in the same way. With sophisticated

simplicity, Sorfa creates a completely self-referential universe. In previous comics, trying to draw realistically interfered with the fluidity of the plot. He gives up photographic detail in order to concentrate on essentials, and finds a new style. In the same way, by exaggerating a former fault, namely the untidiness of his lettering, a new style of lettering more suitable to his work is created. All this adds up to an exuberant, almost rubbery comic. Even the frame borders are irregular and flexible, yet solid.

Small fluffy animals, so beloved of detractors of comics, are inserted into the story, breaking it up into sections or episodes and controlling its pace [Fig 31]. They are cartoons in themselves, separate from the story, slotted into empty spaces and margins. Their ostensible purpose is comic relief: lightening the tone, providing interruptions. Yet they also reinforce the reality of the comic. The style is not restricted to this particular comic; a whole world of similar characters exists outside of it.



Figure 31 Sorfa Van Newman's Hot Coklit Cainer p4

In Gone...A Love Story [Fig 32], my principal concern is still with mastering the conventions of continuous narrative. Frames are laid out on a grid, copied from Love and Rockets. Perhaps too many equal-sized frames are crammed onto each page, so that there is no focal point for the page. But the regularity creates a convincing window onto reality.

This is the success of a narrative comic: that it ceases to be about what is on the page and instead convinces the reader that it is a description of another reality, a real world.

This same regularity forces pace to be determined by the contents of the frames. Emphasis is placed on the characters and action, rather than the layout. Text is minimal. In contrast to my other comics, this story is as concise as possible.

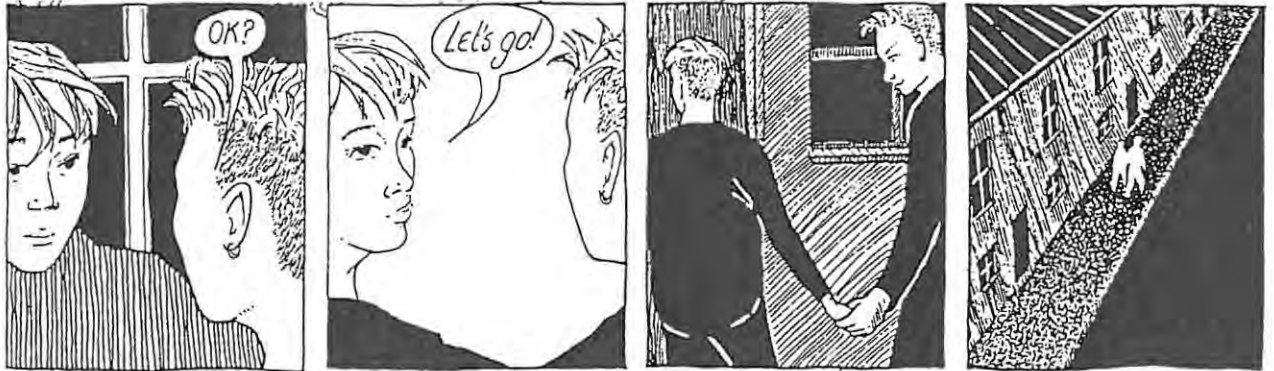


Figure 32 Breytenbach Gone p2

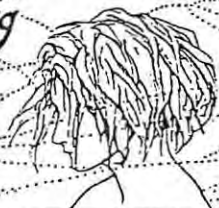
The drawings are mostly linear, comprised of solid flat blacks, whites, and grey tones, clarifying the action further. The characters are idealized and cartoonish, although not cartoon characters in the sense that Sorfa's are. The cartooning has developed for reasons of economy and efficiency, noting only the essentials of expression, and avoiding unnecessary details of physiognomy; the idealization means quicker, simpler drawing, and makes it easier to match characters' faces from frame to frame. All efforts are concentrated on depicting a narrative of events.

The Faerie Files is written by George Georgiou and drawn by myself. The control evident in this comic is due largely to the script. The writer understands underemphasis for the sake of dramatic effect, and also the movement, the visual pace, of a comic. Despite a text that corresponds to each picture, instead of speech bubbles, this comic also manages to create its own reality.

The flowers in the field acknowledge the ritual, accepting our daughter



The old women's chanting
accepts their boon,
catching the pollen,



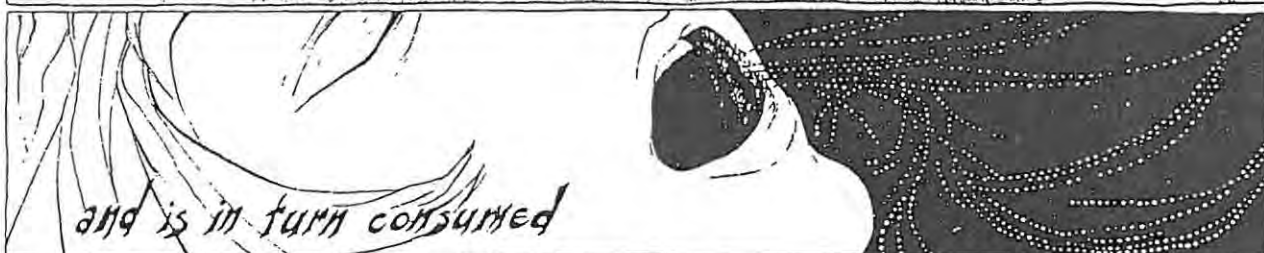
pulling it towards the
ritual, molding it into a
golden maelstrom



The whirlpool consumes her



and is in turn consumed



She is lifted up



as she and the pollen
become materially one

as she and the elemental become spiritually one



In previous comics, my 'visual writing' lessened the possibility of creating a visual reality, because the reader was constantly reminded of the page, the writing and the drawing. Much of the meaning of the comic was explicitly contained in the layout; here, the story is implicit, and comic devices are used more unobtrusively, in order to narrate a story. The story itself is important, not how it is told.

The narrative is divided internally into episodes, which are matched visually by clusters of frames. Page 3 of the comic [fig 33] is one of these episodes. Despite the frames' close proximity to each other, there is movement from each to each. The variation of black and white grounds supports the changes in tone and pace in the text, separating each moment from the next. Sequentialism is in part created by the repetition of identically shaped frames, which are not separated by text. Lettering style remains the same throughout; thus the lettering becomes, in a way, invisible. It is read for its sense, rather than its visual qualities, and does not become intrusive, or fragment the comic. Visual continuity between frames is achieved through the repetition of elements from one frame to the next.

The script's episodic structure, its way of focussing on only one thing at a time, matches the claustrophobic atmosphere of the pictures, an atmosphere achieved through a kind of decorative simplification.

In Who Needs Misery? I again avoid the problem of integrating text boxes and pictures by resorting only to spoken and thought text. The story contains as much introspection as something like Last Week, but is presented from the outside. Instead of an expression of a narrator's state of mind, it is a narration of a character's state of mind. The comic is about differing perceptions of reality, about isolation and intrusion.

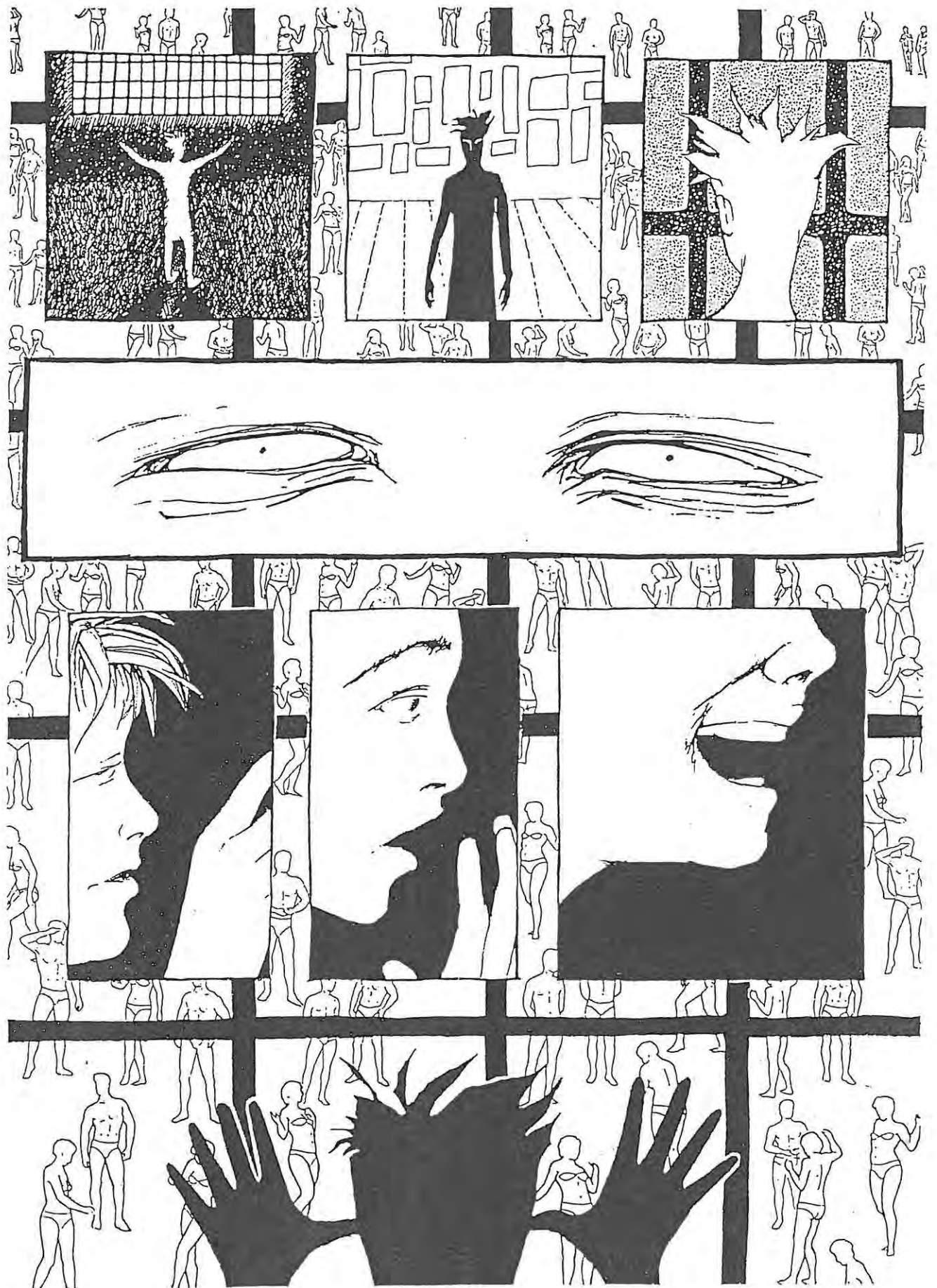


Figure 34 Breytenbach Who Needs Misery? p2

The comic was drawn full-size on A4 rather than being reduced from A3, both in order to work faster and to reduce my tendency to small, intricate decoration that becomes fussy when it is reduced. This accounts for some of the simplification, as well as the controlled layout.

The first two pages use some of the decorative techniques found in previous comics. The narrative on each page is framed within a decorative splash panel. The splash panel acts as a background for the narrative occurring over it. On page 1 it is a purely decorative introduction of swirling stars, suggesting mood. On page 2 [fig 34] it is more informative, becoming part of the final frame, and conveying information about how the character sees her external reality.

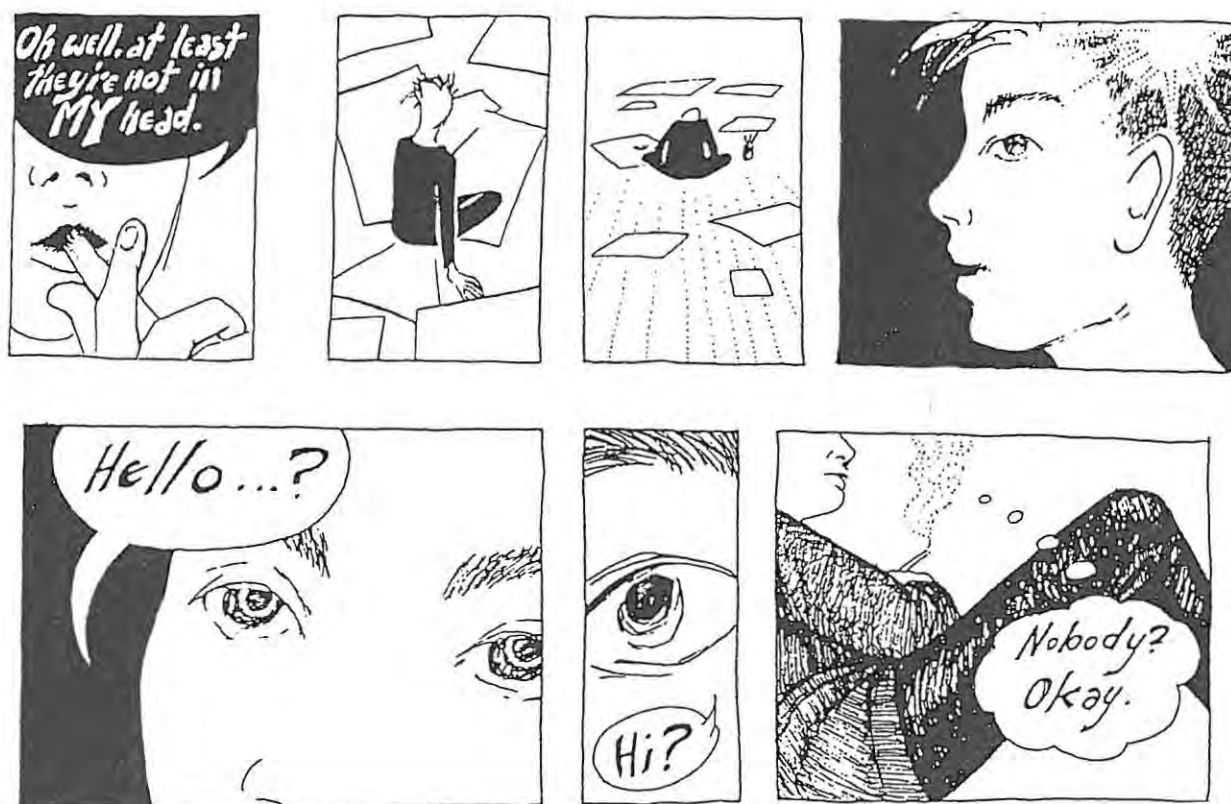


Figure 35 Breytenbach Who Needs Misery? p3

Transitions are action-to-action, compensating for lack of verbal narrative. Focus on details determines the pace of the story [fig 34], and the size of frames is related to their

intended impact. Closeups and cropping are used to create tension and uncertainty [fig 35], particularly through a constant swing from extreme closeup to a more distant view. The character is silent in the first two pages; the introduction of speech is linked to the overall pace of the comic, and functions as a verbal closeup mechanism. Fluctuating background tonalities, from white to grey to black, reinforce dramatic moments rather than depicting realistic lighting. Aesthetic qualities are subservient to information.

In this story I have realised some of the potential of traditional comics: used particularly as a storytelling medium, they convey information differently from the way text or pictures do. Through the visual movement of the story, through the actual transitions from frame to frame that create an illusion of movement, a separate, underlying reality is suggested. The real comic is thus an illusion created by the reader as he or she reads, and exists in the relation between frames rather than in the frames themselves. In other comics I explored comic techniques or tools for their own sake, for their visual interest, not for the purposes of the story. Neither the story nor the pictures should intrude on the unity of the comic; therefore the story is integrated through efficient pruning of the text, and the pictures through coherent, simplified compositions. This is a lesson Bitterkomix learnt early in their publishing career.

Nothing in Common is an earlier comic of mine that had been printed in Damn New Thing, a Johannesburg fanzine, in drastically reduced form: all four pages were fitted onto one. The justification for reprinting it in the original form was that it was designed around page to page transitions, and much was lost in the reduction.

It is a verbally constructed series of very separate incidents and thoughts. Text and pictures have bearing on each other, but it is their independence that is actually exploited.

Text shifts between narrative, speech or soundeffect functions, without visual cues as to these functions, thus further destabilising the structure of the comic. Interest is added to the comic at the expense of clarity. An overall flatness is created by background and foreground vying for attention; characters do not exist within an environment but are placed on top of decoration. This reduces them almost to the substance of similar decoration [fig 36].

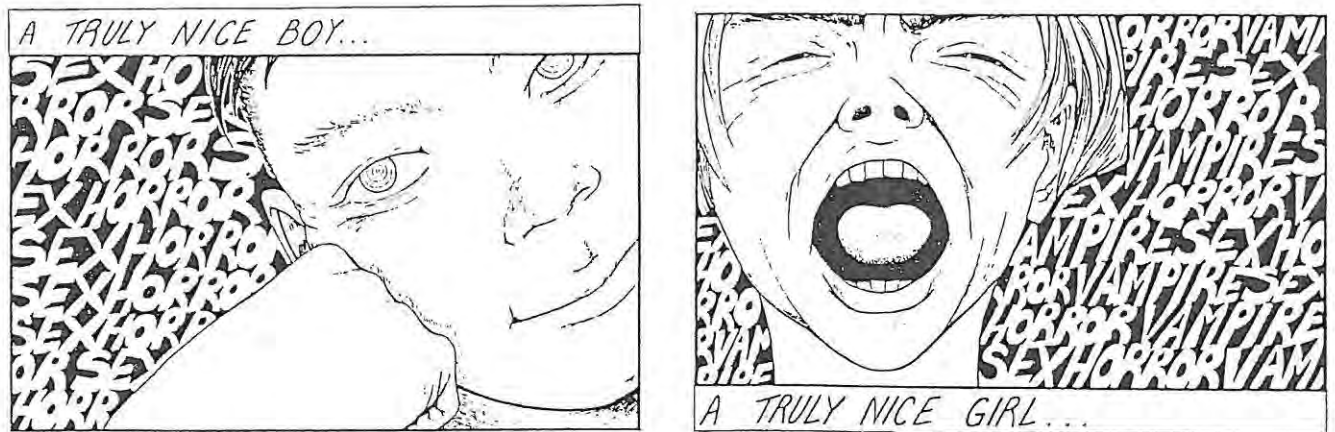


Figure 36 Breytenbach Nothing in Common p1 (reduced)

The links between frames are tenuous, and they become a varied series of pictures. Nothing in Common looks like a comic, but does not behave like one.

Sorfa's one-pager Total Disintegration of A is a personal joke, as already mentioned [see fig 1]. It is notable because he combines the two styles favoured by Komiksoc: traditional action-to-action frames on the righthand side of the page, and on the lefthand side, drawing with comments.

The Killing of Bunion would be more surreal to an outsider than to the people involved. But part of the ethos of underground comics is the celebration of the personal over fantasy, producing work about a community for consumption by that community, however small it is. The characters are cartoons of real people [fig 37]; my characters, although

cartoonish, all look very similar. Sorfa tries to inject surreality into the real world.

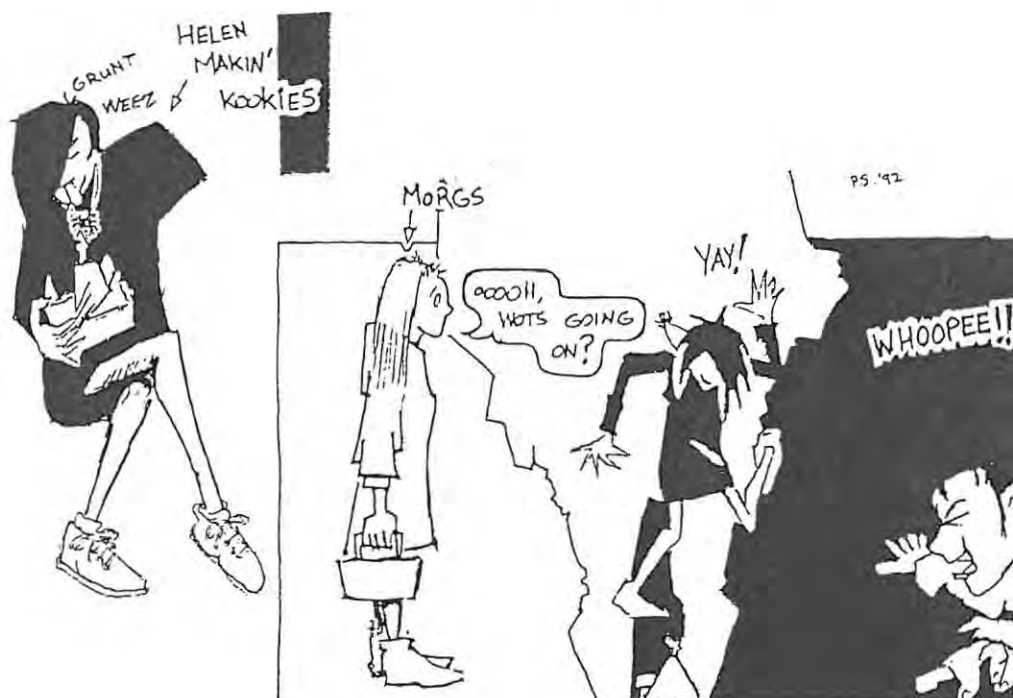


Figure 37 Sorfa The Killing of Bunion

Sorfa's Spiders is again produced from one of Mitchell's scripts, with its whimsical, playful and inventive use of language.

The script uses real people, not cartoon characters, so a balance has to be found between cartooning and a more photographic approach. Sorfa's solution lies in the idiosyncrasy of his drawing style, which allows him leeway to use more cartoonish and exaggerated methods of depiction than a realistic approach would [fig 38]. Because it is consistent throughout, it becomes the character's reality [fig 39]. Anything is possible; they acquire the solidity of photographically realised characters, because they are consistent with their environment. This is a solution to a particular problem that has plagued Sorfa's comics since he started simplifying his drawing. The only choices were plagiarism of a complete style, or development of his own.



Figure 38 Sorfa Spiders p1

Figure 39 Sorfa Spiders p1



3.3. DESIRE

Desire is produced under the editorship of one person, not himself a contributor to the comic. Desire is the most diverse publication; financed by a comic shop, the motivating idea was to provide a forum for local comic artists. Therefore stylistic coherence, as with Komiksoc, was not a primary concern. The artists form a group of very independent contributors. Most of them had little experience in comic-making, and few are represented in more than one issue. (One original Komiksoc member, Sididis, took over partial editorship of Desire 3, and his work is represented in all three issues.) Desire is presented largely as a comparison to more sustained efforts like Komiksoc or Bitterkomix, which are viewed in terms of the development shown by their artists over a period of work.

Initially, like Komiksoc, Desire aspired only to fanzine status, aiming at a very particular audience. Komiksoc's ideals (though not its audience) slowly changed, as the artists familiarised themselves with comics and the novelty of producing a magazine wore off. They became more concerned with personally mastering the medium. Contact with Bitterkomix also had its effect. Desire's editor recognised one of the criteria for development, writing in the first editorial: "I have a dream...and that is to see local graphic literature flourishing. To this end I hope to begin producing a regular comic." Unfortunately, although Desire itself appeared at fairly regular intervals, few of the artists contributed more than once. Desire also subscribed to some punk ideals; at first, especially, it seemed they printed work by anyone willing to contribute, regardless of the quality of the comic. The Battle of Beruna [fig 1] is one of the worst examples, perhaps even more inept than some of the comics printed in Komiksoc's first issue, Zombie Birdhouse. While commendably democratic, this policy did not bring overwhelming financial success.



Figure 1 T. Begg The Battle of Beruna p2

Soothsayers, by Gimbal Mounted God Comics, is pretentious, unnecessarily mysterious, inexplicable, and confusing. The plot is bad secondhand science fiction. It is not too poorly executed, as these comics go, and is a good example of its type.

The artist concentrates too much on producing a facsimile of a comic, and not enough on the process of creating a comic. There is no understanding of anything but the surface. He borrows indiscriminately from other comics, not to expand or strengthen his story, but to make it resemble a preconceived notion of what a comic should look like [fig 2].

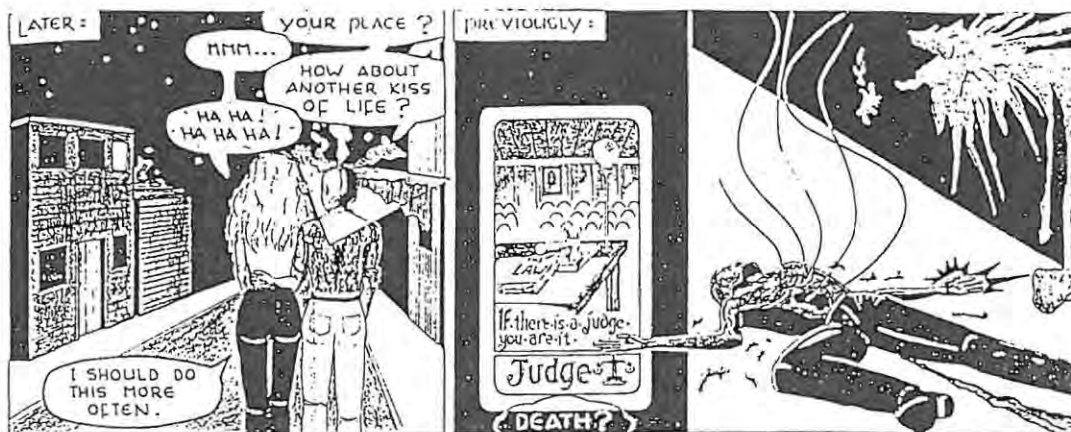


Figure 2 Gimbal Mounted God Comics Soothsayers p2 (reduced)

BONE STAIR CASE

STEP BY STEP...

THE DANCE...

I'VE BEEN LIVING IN THIS HOUSE FOR ALL OF MY YEARS. I HAVE WORKED HERE THAT LONG. I HAVE NOT BEEN PAID. I DON'T NEED, THERE'S NO WANT OF MONEY, WELL, NOTHING EVER CHANGES...

LIKE CLIMBING.

I LIFT MY FOOT FROM THE STEP ON WHICH A MAN'S FRAGILE HEAD ONCE CRACKED,

I PUT IT DOWN ON THE PLACE WHERE HIS HEART STOPPED BEATING...

BODY FEELS SO LIGHT

I CLIMB THE SPINE OF THE HOUSE, BUCKETS BOUYING ME UP, WITH EYES CLOSED I FEEL EACH STEP...

LIKE A MEMORY

LIKE A MEMORY TURNING

AND RETURNING.

© FREUDIAN SLIT PRODUCTIONS 1989

The text of Bone Staircase, by Freudian Slit Productions, imitates a certain genre of writing, not very successfully, but the integration of text and pictures is interesting. Layout and pace are determined directly by the demands of this particular script, not by any convention. The artist maintains a consciousness of the motion of reading, and consequently of the movement of the comic, which indicates an awareness of the reader, of the process of communication [fig 3]. The intricate structure of layout, plot, and thoughts, is quite unusually not complicated by intricate drawings.

Andrew Macklin is an original contributor to Komiksoc, who makes almost no use of any conventional comic techniques. Vampire is an illustrated monologue, with deliberately archaic text, lettering, drawing, composition, and layout. Partly due to the amount of detail in the words and pictures, it is difficult to read the visual and verbal texts together: the reader must continually interrupt the reading of one to jump to the other [fig 4].

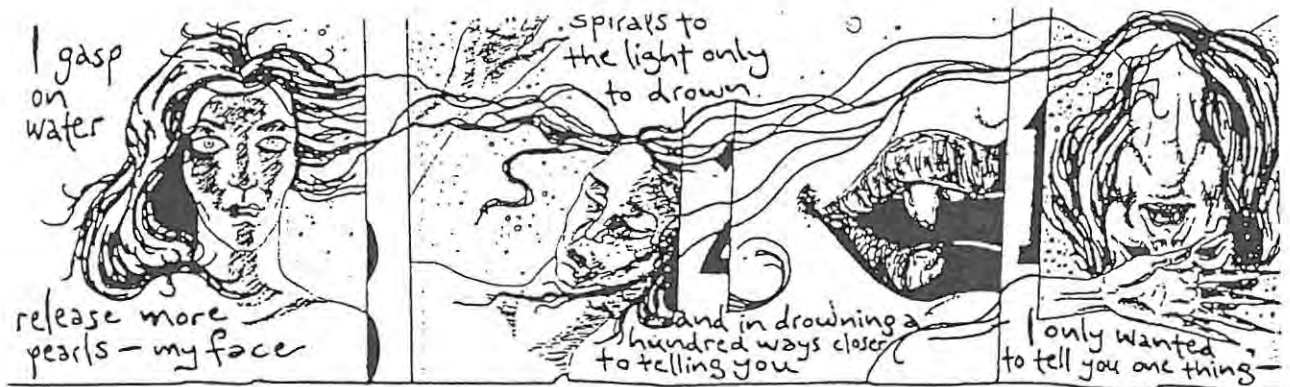


Figure 4 Macklin Vampire p3

Gay Wars, by an artist known only as Patrick, is an atmospheric monologue which builds to a climax. It differs from similar Komiksoc stories in that the narrator is seen from outside, and that both contemplation and action are combined in the story. Abundant use



Figure 5 Patrick Gay Wars p7

of solid blacks and a subjective viewpoint mean that accurate detailed drawing are not necessary in creating a solid reality. Incorporation of magical or surreal elements increases the subjectivity of the episode, making it an emotional rather than a factual account. Visual atmosphere contributes to the conclusion reached through the narrative [fig 5].

Actual South Africans is one of the few successful comics in Desire that does not look like a conventional comic. Although it uses transition from detail to detail and a variety of viewpoints skilfully, the text is separated from the pictures, a commentary running underneath, not incorporated into the frames. Simple line drawings show only essential details, adding atmosphere rather than content to the text. The script is cumulative; the growing drop of liquid, placed at the centre of the page and the middle of the story, emphasizes the narrative style visually. The whole is coherent and thus concentrated, communicating without distraction. Actual South Africans demonstrates that control and selectivity are more effective in the creation of a comic than strenuously detailed drawings or elaborate scripts [fig 6].

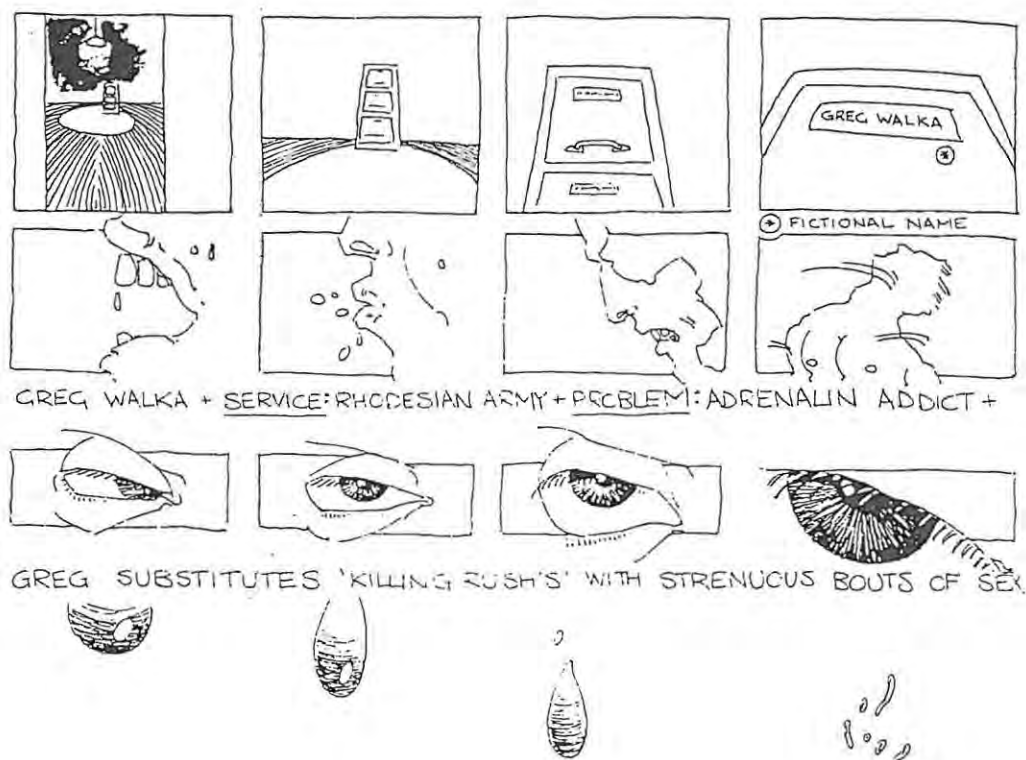


Figure 6 Anon. Actual South Africans (reduced)

Afrikaanse Helde en Gode Deel 3 and Deel 9 are clever and pithy, containing a plethora of references, both visual and verbal [fig 7]. The subtitle aligns this comic with Bitterkomix as an irreverent satire of cultural icons, invoking all the holy cows of Afrikaans literature and politics with absurd, naive, childish humour. However, the intent of these comics is no more than satire, a quick joke.

The drawings are only as skilful as is necessary in order to articulate the punchline, conveying the gist of the comic without interfering in its communication. The pictures are a condensation of the text, nothing more than a shorthand form of it, but they are brilliantly efficient. Although the joke in both cases is literary, mostly verbal, the pictures expand the humour of the story. Their whimsicality both adds to and tempers the seriousness of the satire. In this, the artist is very unlike Bitterkomix, who are serious and bitter and funny but never whimsical. Yet however absurd it appears, Afrikaanse Helde en Gode is well-informed and sophisticated.

AFRIKAANSE HELDE EN GODE deel iii
in afrikaans vertaal deur danie craven.



Figure 7 Anon. Afrikaanse Helde en Gode Deel 3 (reduced)

Rue, by Sididis, begins well. The first page, certainly, is both more professional and conventional than work he did for Komiksoc. The setting is a pop concert; Sididis always confines his subject matter to a very particular subculture, one heavily informed by comics and music. The exaggerated violence of this story is derived from mainstream comics, as is the standard layout of the first page and the action-to-action transitions throughout [fig 8].

However, as in almost all his other comics, it deteriorates and loses intensity. The detailed drawings of the first page become sparser and sparer line drawings, which in comparison look incomplete, as if areas of black have been left out. After the carefully paced first page, narrative and explanatory detail become verbal rather than visual, a kind of shortcut. Visual explanation depends on shifts from detail to detail; this is instead telescoped into frantic speech bubbles, placed in rather spare frames [fig 9]. Fussy drawing had been a problem for Sididis in Komiksoc publications, and this is a problem he has solved. However, the most dramatic moments of the story fall flat because of insufficient drawing and a lack of emphasis.

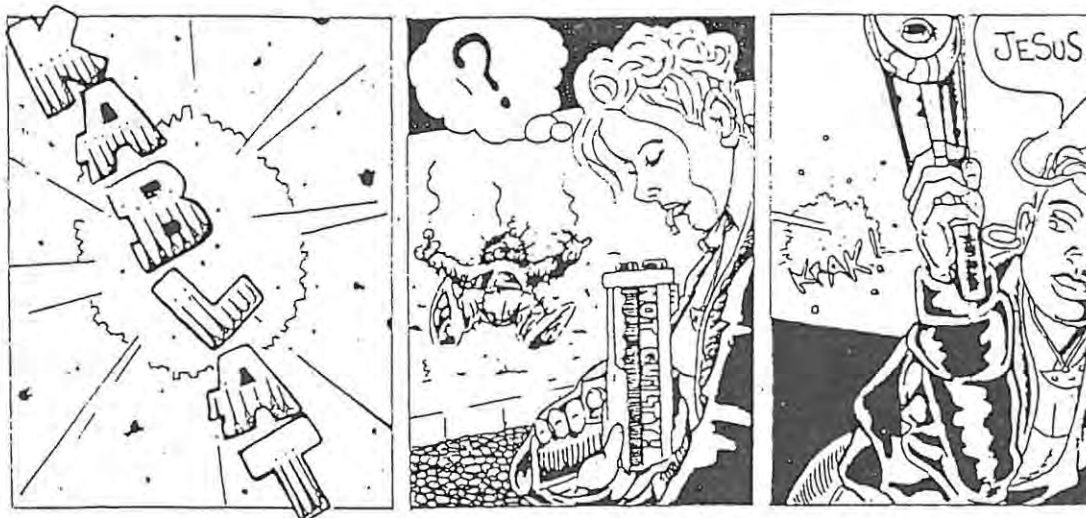


Figure 8 Sididis Rue p1



Figure 9 Sididis Rue p2 (reduced)

Layout is effective in conveying the action, and the composition of elements within each frame is dramatic. But in such a visually detailed comic, composition needs to be supported by tonalities giving direction to focal points.

The Fifth Arm of the Pentacle is drawn by Sididis, from a script by Paul Hewitt. It borrows from a part of pop culture known as Gothic, which is informed by fantasy and science-fiction writing, horror movies, and a particular genre of pop music, and has rules and conventions peculiar to itself. It is a very European subculture; once again Sididis is aiming at a very specific audience.

This is one of his more ambitious projects, combining photographs with very detailed drawing. Still a standard comic script, and not terribly original, The Fifth Arm copies 2000AD style comics, but with a personal sense of humour thrown in. With cartoonish exaggeration and simplification, the comic satirises itself while unfolding. Although more completely and carefully executed, it still has all the faults of carelessness that Sididis's other work shows. The amalgamation of his personal style and his influences is not

completely resolved. Possibly his problems of layout and drawing derive from the reduction of artwork for printing.

The second part of Sididis's The Fifth Arm of the Pentacle is very ambitious. Not content with describing an encounter between people, or narrating a sequence of events over a short period of time, like most of the comics included in this study, he creates a whole world and tries to depict all of it [fig 10].



Figure 10 Sididis The Fifth Arm of the Pentacle ep. 2, p1 (reduced)

Once again he runs out of steam; the comic does not fulfill the promise of the first episode. Photocopies of works by Durer and Klimdt are included, like the photographs in the previous episode, rather unobtrusively as background detail [fig 11]. Possibly these replace background detail the artist was too lazy to draw, as the inclusions do not seem significant, and are not completely integrated into the comic.

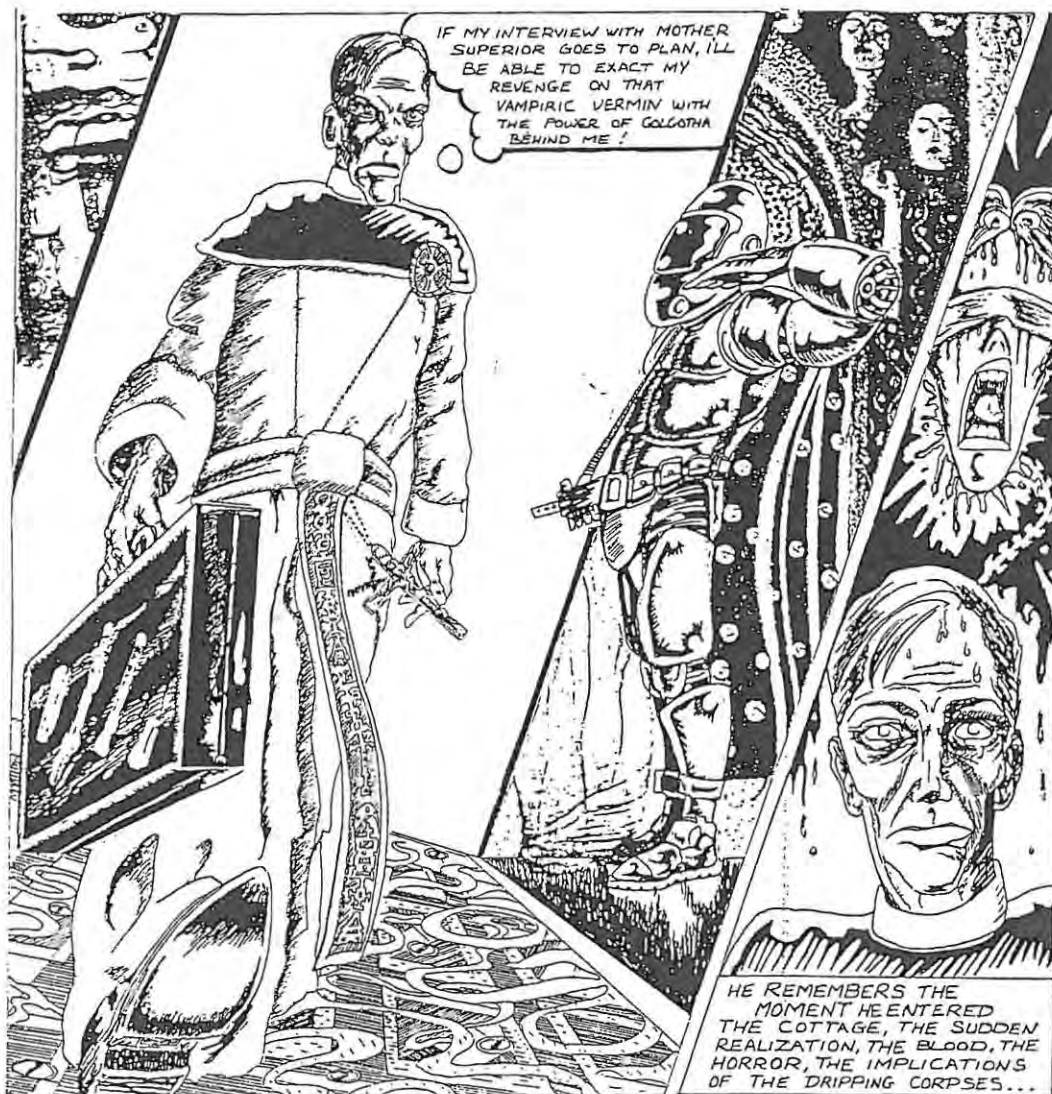


Figure 11 Sididis The Fifth Arm of the Pentacle ep.2 p2 (reduced)

Comprehension of the plot relies on familiarity with vampire, fantasy, or science-fiction stories, and might be confusing to anyone lacking this background knowledge. Sididis

seems to pick out elements, without explaining their context [figs 10, 11]. The result is an abbreviated version of the genre.

The plot then turns into a standard action sequence, its structure derived from film or comics. It is scrappily drawn, but the timing is conventionally arranged, which facilitates comprehension. In creating a fantasy comic, Sididis draws on both fantasy and comic conventions, producing an amalgamation of the two genres.

Looking Forward to Death, by Donn Ingle, is a completely derivative script, also relying on 2000 AD science-fiction for inspiration. Excessive violence seems to be obligatory in these cloned comics: either the comics are an excuse to draw violence, or this violence is necessary to the appearance of a 'proper' comic.

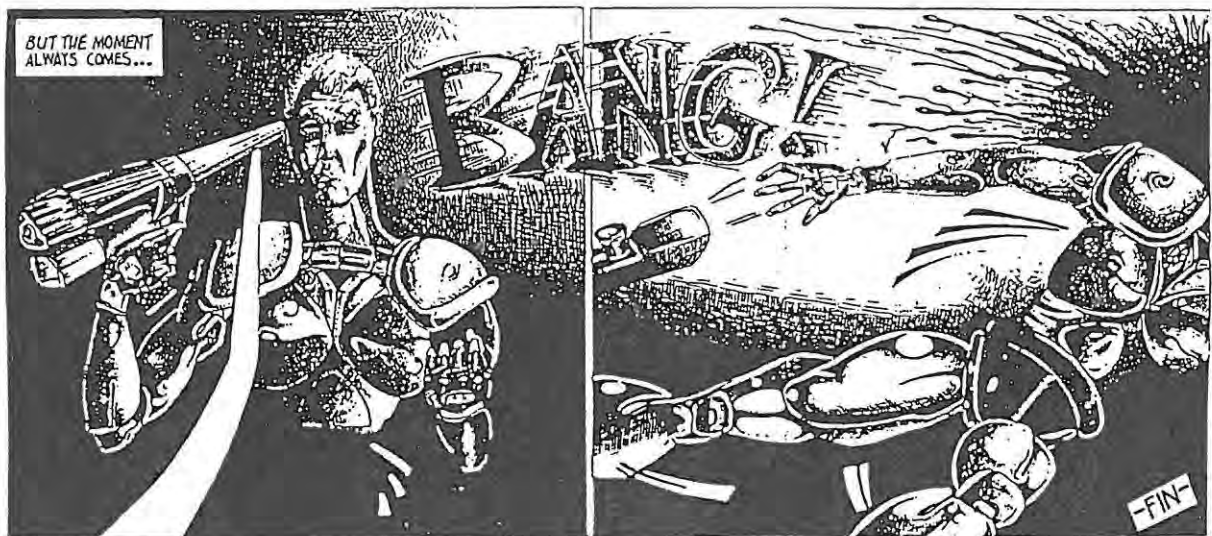


Figure 12 Ingle Looking Forward to Death p2

The artist appears to be familiar with some comic conventions. Tonalities and layout are skilfully manipulated, and frame sizes change according to the pace of the narrative.

Speechbubbles and text boxes are not as awkwardly placed and lettered as they usually are in amateur comics. Motion lines, however, are overly decorative, inhibiting their function [fig 12]. In all, this strip is remarkable only in its accurate duplication of a commercial comic.

Out of my Mind's Eye, by Donn Ingle, features the lead singer of a band as a guardian angel come to help a boy defend himself against bullies. It is a fantasy of revenge, and this time the extremes of violence serve a purpose, creating an escapist world of superheroes with superpowers who are able to exact this revenge. The depiction of violence has a kind of black humour to it, because it is an indication of the extent of the small child's victory over his persecutors.

Inserting a superhero dynamic into a realistic situation, and transforming a real life hero, the singer, into a superhero, explains and tempers the borrowings from commercial comics. Such copying often takes itself very seriously, becoming the most significant aspect of the comic and leaving little space for any personal expression, or even a sense of humour.



Figure 13 Ingle Out of my Mind's Eye p2

The awkwardness of this comic is a result of the artist's attempt to use certain comic conventions (which here include plot, structure and type of story as well as more mechanical details like sound effects and speech bubbles) in a personal way [fig 13].

Tyrannosaurus-ex is a rampage through a science-fiction script. By mastering comic techniques through imitation, the artist is slowly developing his own style of narrative. The plot is very short, describing a hunt, and most of it is a fight action sequence. Contextualization is minimal but sufficient, reduced to the first two frames and the last two [fig 14].

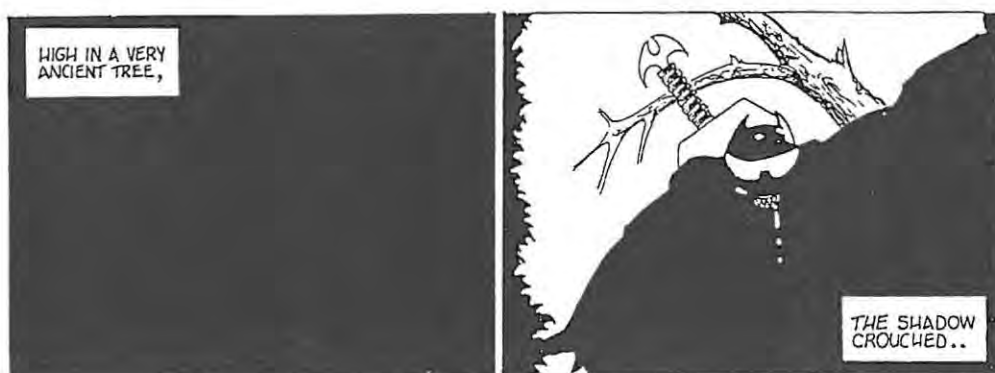


Figure 14 Ingle Tyrannosaurus-ex p1 (reduced)



Figure 15 Ingle Tyrannosaurus-ex p3 (reduced)

The drawings are dramatic, very detailed and intense. Depictions of action are still a bit static [fig 15], but show an improvement on his previous comics. Text is selective; the pictures tell the story, and much of the narrative is contained in the pacing [fig 14].

3.4. BITTERKOMIX

Bitterkomix started in 1992 with two contributors, Conrad Botes and Joe Dog (Anton Kannemeyer), who worked closely together. Only gradually did they incorporate work by others into their publication. Being part of a more coherent movement in popular culture, that of Afrikaans pop music, the comics progressed quickly to an accepted level of professionalism. Their overt intention was never exclusively to experiment with comics as a medium, but rather to produce an Afrikaans comic. They are as concerned with content as with form - a combination that appears only later in Komiksoc's work. As a result, Bitterkomix are the most formal and in some ways also the most conservative artists examined in this sample. They have a great deal of respect for comics tradition, and a thorough knowledge of it.

Returning briefly to the matter of terminology, Bitterkomix translate comics as 'komix', not 'strokiesprente' or even 'strips', which is the Dutch and often the preferred Afrikaans term. In this choice they explicitly acknowledge a debt to much previous graphic literature, both the English-language tradition of comics and more narrowly the American underground comix of the sixties.

Bitterkomix set themselves up, in plots and editorial, as oppositional and subversive. They are the most traditionally 'underground' of the artists discussed. Following influences like Robert Crumb, one of the leaders in American underground comix, the content of stories is subversive, while the style is fairly conventional.

Discussion of the four issues of Bitterkomix deals first with issues one and two, and then with issues three and four, in order to clearly demonstrate the gradual development of the artists.

In the first issue the stories are printed chronologically, appearing initially naive, deliberately awkward and stilted. In subsequent issues the artists try to work towards greater clarity and economy, but also happen to create an impression of greater austerity.

In the first story, Case No. 308, which is a collaboration between Botes and Dog, there is much that is forcefully realistic, and little elegance. The story is strongly political; the main character, a musician called Tommy, is captured and brainwashed by the security forces, becoming an inhuman killer. In the process of narrating these events, the artists viciously lampoon both military and police forces.

The overall style is deliberately crude, raw and nervous. The drawings are reminiscent of many underground comics: flat, simplistic and tentative [fig 1]. There are long gaps of time between the crammed frames, so that each stands as an isolated moment that does not completely describe events. The text is in stilted English.

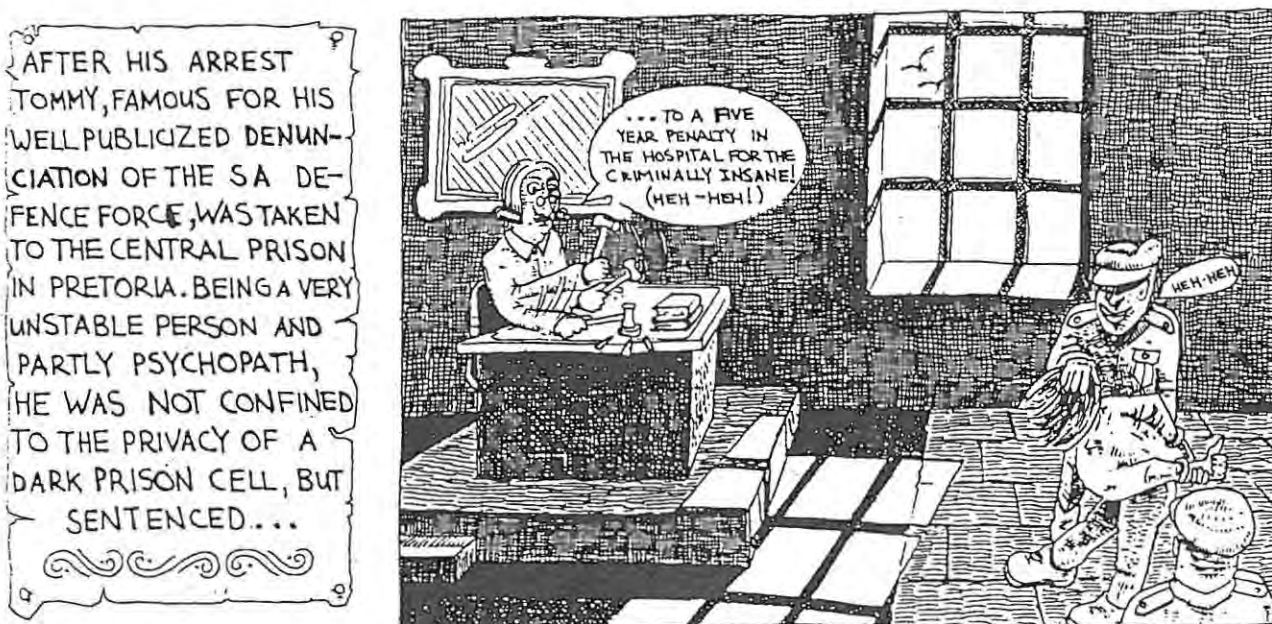


Figure 1 Botes, Dog Case No. 308 p2

From Case No. 308, the story of Tommy develops into what the artists modestly call The Tommy Saga. The transition from Case No. 308 to the rest of The Tommy Saga is shocking. Suddenly the artists are articulate, even flamboyant, in drawing as well as verbal language, and the story flows easily. Case 308 is mostly narrative, but the sequels balance narrative and dialogue. The drawings turn to a more commercial comic style, although they remain idiosyncratic, and abound with personal references that would be very out of place in a traditional comic. A sense remains of the artists hiding the seriousness of their intentions behind humour and more particularly mockery, but now they hide behind a style of accomplishment, rather than behind awkwardness and inadequacy.

Explicit attention is paid to the layout of the page, even drawn to it. Especially in these first issues, the organisation of elements into an aesthetically pleasing whole seems to be of greater importance than creating believable characters or stories. This is turned to an advantage by their superb decorative abilities. The composition is playful, with elaborate titles and slick experimentation. Such an approach also lends itself to very self-conscious story structures, like the page-long prologue illustrated here [fig 2]. Instead of narrative, the story becomes arrested in passages of pure elaboration of a single idea.

The artists become stylists, even when the narrative resumes, using typeface and juxtaposition of drawings and photographs to convey essential adjectival information. They are subversive in an educated, subtle way, deconstructing the comic as they create it. In Case No. 308 this subversion was articulated through a deliberate inability or refusal to speak 'correctly'. In The Tommy Saga the vocabularies of comics and advertising and film (and photography) are used and abused with facility, to the same ends [fig 3].



THE CURSE OF KRØL!!

TOMMY, HELD EN MARTELAAR VAN DUISENDE LINKSE AKTIVISTE, IS VERPLAAS NA BRAKWATER; 'N GOTSVERLATE GRENSPOS TUSSEN SUID-AFRIKA EN BOTSWANA ...



5 KM DAARVANDAAN SMOKKEL LORCAN WHITE DIE WITPYP NA SY COMRADES IN DIE TOWNSHIPS.

HIER LEES HY (MET ONDERDRUKTE LAGBUIE) VANDAG SE "WALTER DIE WONDERMAN" STROKIE.



TERUG IN JO'BURG DINK NURSE S. WILSON IN TENEERGEDRUKTE NOSTALGIE AAN HAAR COCAINE-DAE IN TOMMY SE ARMS ...



Figure 3 Botes, Dog The Tommy Saga: Die Hart van Duisternis p3

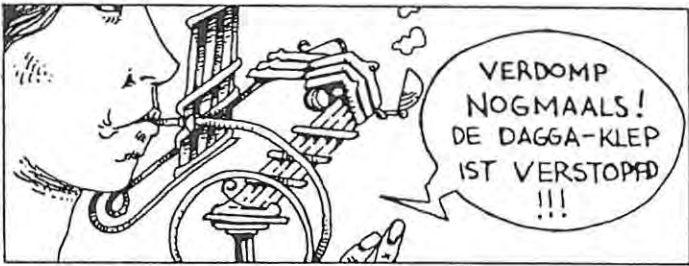
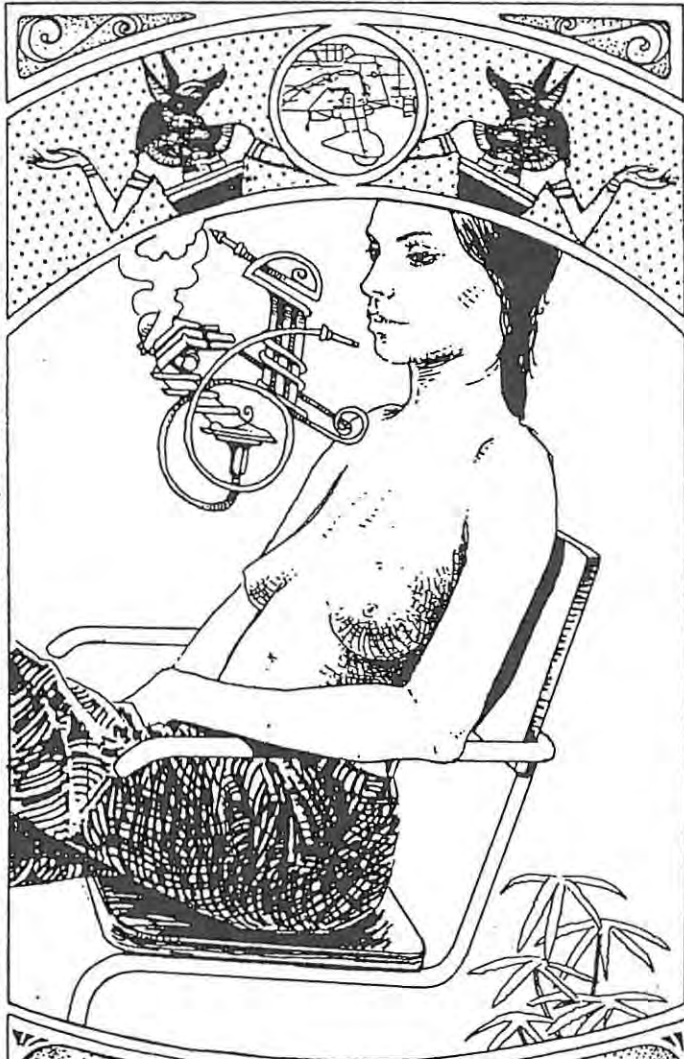
In later issues this eclecticism is abandoned in favour of a simpler approach, resisting the excessive borrowing that sometimes makes the earlier comics hard to read because there is so much to read. The drawings become less indulgently sensual: they are diagrams that tell a story, not pictures that illustrate one.

The contents of issue 1 are mostly psychedelia, fragmentation, vulnerability, and taboo subjects (drugs and sex). Often the stories do not rely on a clear, concise narrative, but on a structure that is almost stream-of-consciousness, expressing a state of mind rather than an articulated idea. The Astonishing Adventure of Sir Joseph Patrick, by Joe Dog [Fig 4], is a typical example. The artist pushes the limits of intelligibility, while sticking doggedly to the visual structure of a comic. The drawings remain realistic (bearing in mind that realism is a relative concept in comics), and each frame is more or less coherent within itself, but they do not relate to each other in obvious or clear ways.

Some non-sensical fragments are particularly troublesome, because they are not nonsensical in a lyrical style, and thus cannot easily be explained as poetic in intent [fig 5]. No mood is conveyed. It is a bold, clear style, even cartoony; the implication of a spare undecorated narrative style is that each element conveys some part of a message. Yet these illustrations illustrate nothing but themselves.

It is as if the artist is trying to draw the reader's attention to the page itself, thereby exposing the lack of content of his comic, and undermining the reality of it. Much of Bitterkomix's subtlety and fascination lies here: their stories are mysterious both on the surface and behind it, in appearing to hold so much deeper meaning and turning out to be empty of it. In later issues this leads to more obviously formal experimentation.

Comics exist largely in the reader's mind, and particularly in the gaps between frames [McCloud, 1994, p.68]. Bitterkomix narrow this space until it almost ceases to exist, pushing the invisible comic to the brink of visibility, until the reader is almost forced to believe that the comic exists solely on the page itself. The confusion generated by this tension is perhaps the best expression of the bitterness indicated in their title; unlike most of the other artists, Bitterkomix do not only experiment with the connection



WHAT?...!!? IN SEARCH OF YOUR TRAKTOR-MOTOR!? SHE ASKED IN A RATHER PECULIAR ACCENT... AND FOR GODS SAKE STOP GAWKING AT MY TITS...

OH! SUGAR

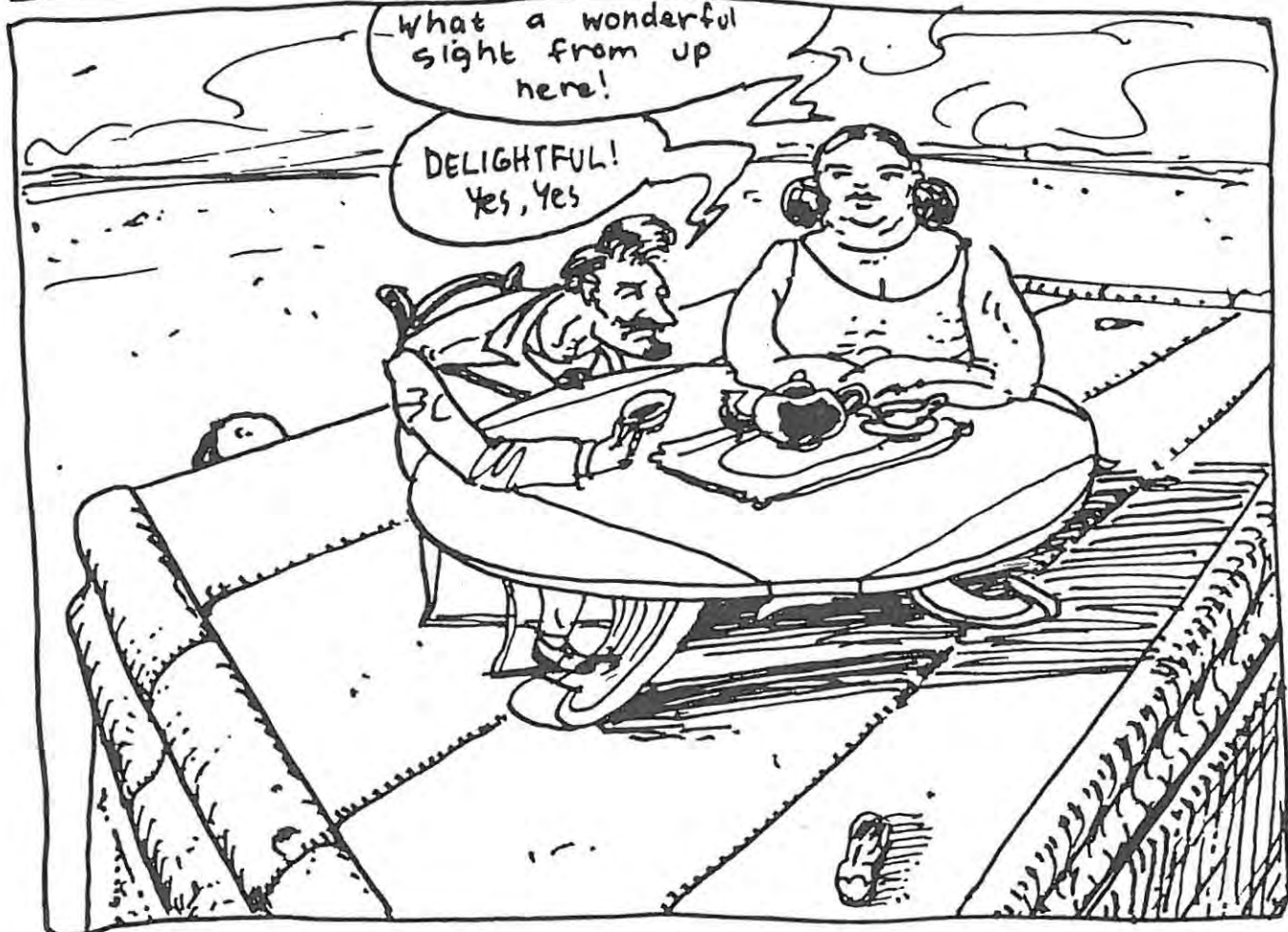
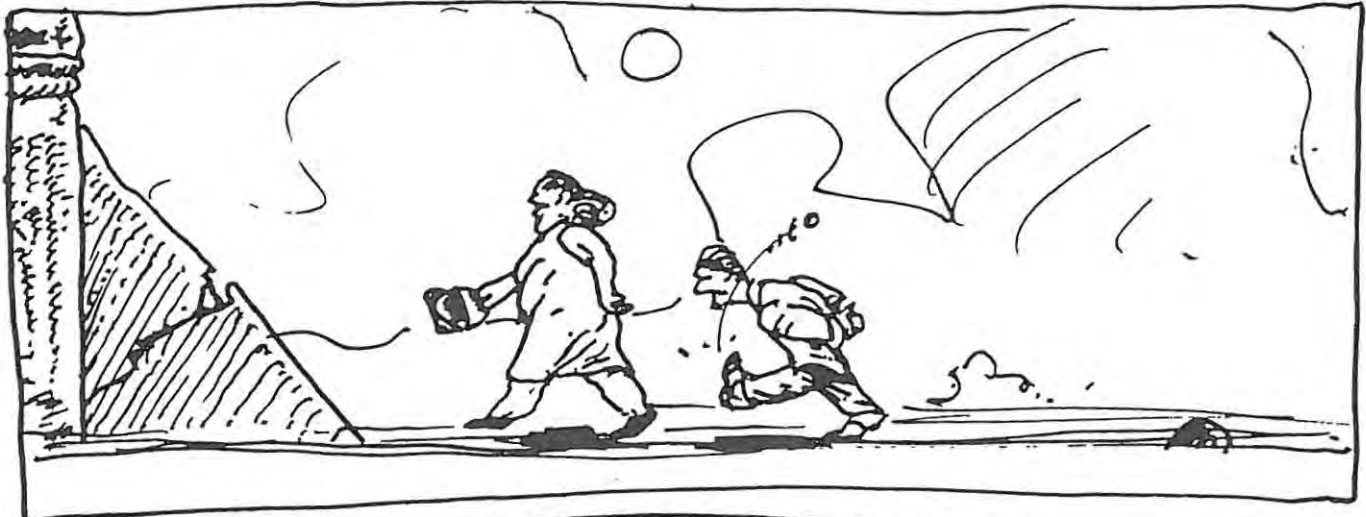


Figure 5 Botes Oh! Sugar

between form and content, but also play with the limits of what can be communicated via this connection, and appear to find it very limiting indeed. They are bitter because conventional means of expression are closed to what they want to express. Their greatest achievement thus is found in later issues, when they manage to come to terms, at least partially, with the artificiality of the medium, and allow the comic a greater space in which to live while maintaining their (and the reader's) awareness of its construction. The example below, from Bitterkomix 4, is from A Short And Feeble Affair [fig 6], in which Dog maintains a tense balance between the story and the mechanics of the comic.

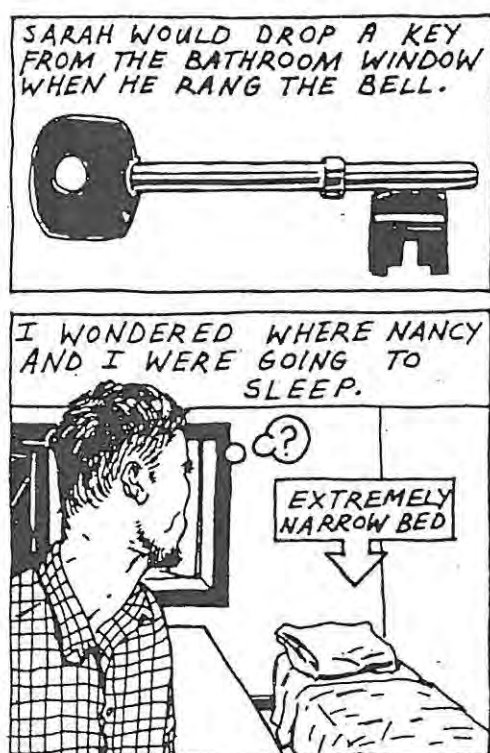


Figure 6 Dog A Short and Feeble Affair p2

In An Occurrence [fig 7], Dog starts to deconstruct comics, playing with non-sequitur of caption and picture. The comic seems to make sense, but also seems inconsequential; therefore it is arresting. This is a device used in the longer stories to add sparkle and relief, and more importantly, as discussed above, to express what is possibly inexpressible. It alerts readers to the structure of comics.

AN OCCURENCE

DURING A VISIT AT 10.30 AM

HEY, LET'S GET
SMASHED ON JACK
DANIELS!



A SUDDEN GUST WHIPS SIR JOSEPH
PATRICK'S HAT CLEAN FROM HIS HEAD,
EXPOSING THE SOFT PINK SKIN TO THE
RAYS OF AFRICA'S RELENTLESS SUN.

ROCKING GOOD IDEA!
I'M HURTING AS
IT IS.



J. DOG 92

Another example is figure 8, from A Boy Called Julia: Part 2, in which the picture is clearly not illustrating the text; yet the two are interdependent.

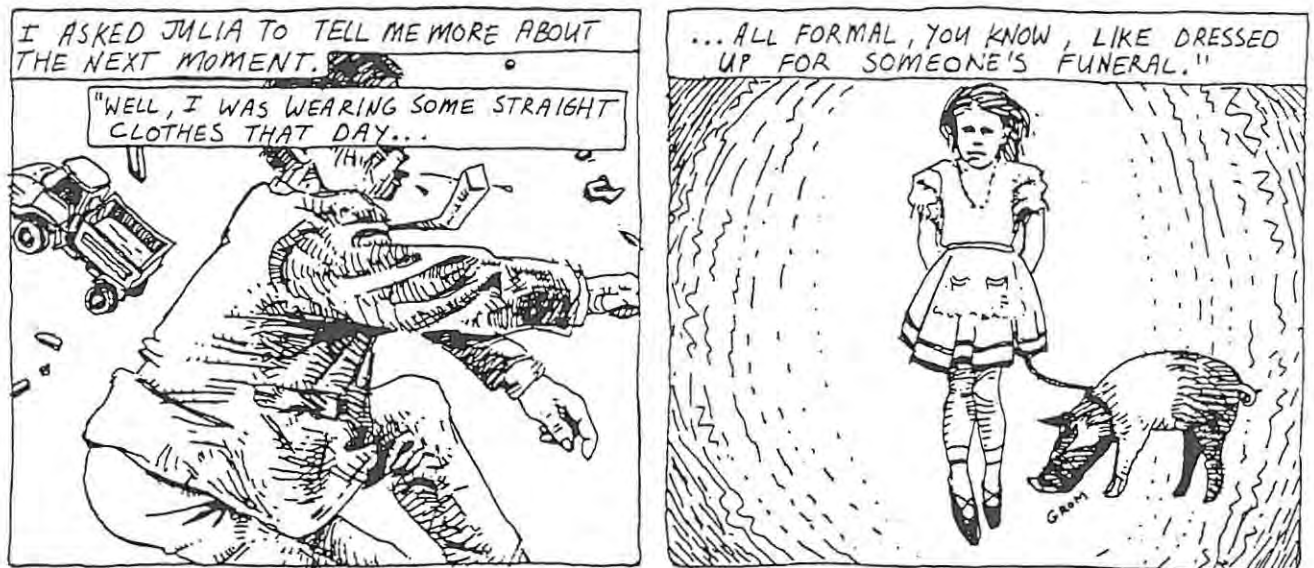


Figure 8 Dog A Boy Called Julia: Part 2 p1

The reason they cannot be completely independent is that they are linked by the conventions of comics. However bizarre the link between the two, it will still be accepted as a link and some reason will be found for it, because that is how comics, by definition, work. Often such frames or inserts rely on a wider frame of reference than the comic itself; often this is how the link can be deduced. In An Occurrence this device is blown out of proportion to become a thing in itself, and a reason for the comic. The joke is the comic. In contrast Drug Raid at 4am [fig 9] plagiarises Tintin by Herge, in the tradition of underground comics, and the comic illustrates the joke.

Issue 2 as a whole appears more confident and focused, therefore less flamboyant, than the first one. Dog's Missileman has the same feeling as The Tommy Saga but it is more comprehensible and accessible, although still highly personal. Frames are composed classically, favouring narrative over pure expression; the drawing style is clean and

ASLEEP...



DIE THOM(P)SONS PULL N' BLIND ENE OP KUIFIE...



Figure 9 Botes Drug Raid at 4am

structured. Familiar sources, contemporary Afrikaans and South African culture, are used for jokes and puns, but they are integrated into the narrative rather than being the subject of it. The Owlhouse is the setting for the story, and details like 'vaaljapie', which is described as a drug to subdue the slave, reveal a constant awareness of the context of the story and the comic itself.

Missileman takes on a standard comics theme - the superhero. This genre has been reworked continuously during the 80s and 90s, and many of the first full-length graphic novels examined the relevance of and ideology behind superheroes. Watchmen [Moore, Gibbons, 1987], The Dark Knight Returns [Miller, 1986], and initially Love and Rockets [Hernandez, 1987] are among some of the early examples. The main thrust of these comics is to humanise superheroes, and explain the forces that make them so powerful, both the forces that give them superpowers and the forces that make them popular among readers. Bitterkomix, in their treatment of the genre, owe much to these sources.

In Forbidden Flower, Botes does more than satirize: he mocks, exposes and ridicules superheroes. With violent, powerful, loose drawings he portrays the cosmic forces involved, grotesquely debased [fig 10]. Characteristic slapstick humour defuses some of the viciousness of the attack on this genre.

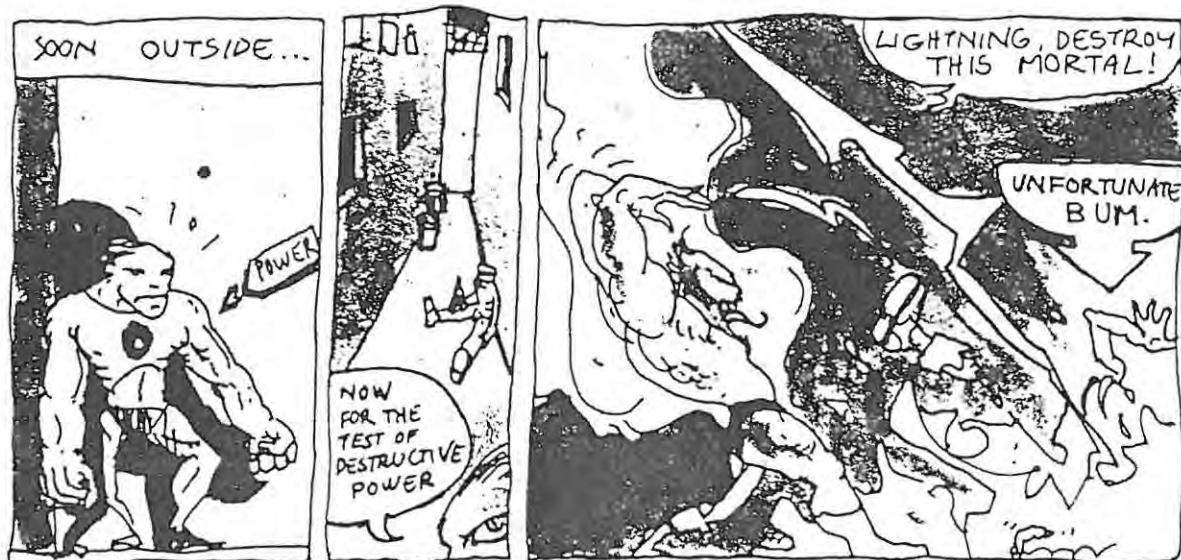


Figure 10 Botes Forbidden Flower p2

Missileman is a longer, more complex story. The storyline is concise, complementing the controlled drawing style, and contains dialogue, while much of the narrative is carried by the drawings. Dog sets the satire in context. It is a more sympathetic view of a superhero, retaining some of the magic. Missileman is a possible superhero, and although treated ironically, is still heroic. In keeping with the contemporary attitude, he is also seen as a victim, not responsible for his powers and slightly non-plussed by them. Much of the humour derives from this view. Less cosmic grandeur and more down to earth detail makes the story plausible. Cinematic drawing and a quiet, moody atmosphere are influenced by European comics rather than American superhero comics, a juxtaposition that illustrates the inappropriateness of Missileman as a traditional superhero. In some ways, the artist is not so much satirising the superhero theme as localising it; that the comic reads as a satire has much to do with the reader's expectations of the genre.



Figure 11 Dog Missileman p8

Some verbal comic conventions are mocked as lofty narration is contrasted with colloquial dialogue [Fig 11]. Furthermore, captions are in English and speech in Afrikaans. The implication is that the comic format is simply a transparent disguise; telling the story in conventional, unimaginative "comics" English is merely a way to present events that occur in an untranslatable real language.

The use of two languages reflects an aspect of comics that will be examined in more detail below, as the Bitterkomix artists themselves confront it: the fact that the comic medium itself is an intergration of two languages, the visual and the verbal.

Botes' In die Arms van 'n Apokalips continues the subversive stance adopted in the first issue. Mockery or deconstruction of other media is incorporated, but not centrally, in the form of visual puns or jokes. That the story is a commentary on the paranoia and limitations of Afrikaner nationalism in general and institutions like the National Party and the Broederbond in particular, is less important in defining its originality than noting that the metaphor set up for reality is extended to the point at which it has its own reality and can be read as a story in itself. Drawing the main character as a caricature of FW de Klerk is sufficient as a pointer to the intentions of the artist, but the character is given a life of its own; this carries the story beyond a mere parable or simple joke.



Figure 12 Botes In die Arms van 'n Apokalips p9

Both artists make use of a great variety of frames, the structure of a classic action comic. Even in subdued sequences, focus on details and gestures drive the story more than pure narrative could [fig 14]. With this comic, Botes learns to use pictures to tell his story; the text and the artwork are completely interdependent. There is a sense of relief, when comparing this comic to the earlier one, a feeling that the story has its own rhythm. Case No. 308 perhaps benefitted from the nervous structure imposed by a superfluity of both text and drawing; a humorous story is far better executed in this more confident, flowing manner.



Figure 14 Botes In die Arms van 'n Apokalips p15

Soundeffects are more pervasive and less decorative. As the story, the comic behind the comic, becomes more real, the soundeffects must be 'heard' more than seen. Botes still uses the decorative elements of the first issue, but these are now subtler and infrequent.

The preference for illustration and styling disappears as he finds that standard comic tools can be used effectively to explain things that before he had sought to find new vocabularies for. Strangeness is contained coherently within a story and stream-of-consciousness is not used merely for its own sake. Idiosyncracies that convey mood are kept relevant to the story. At first the artists played with various possibilities; now they refine and limit themselves to more concise and efficient communication.



Figure 15 Botes A Perfect Little Consumer p5 (reduced)

A Perfect Little Consumer by Botes satirizes advertising. This kind of theme is most suited to Bitterkomix's work, which is analytical and deconstructive in essence and intent. The message is not explicitly stated, but carried through the development of the story. The discrepancy between the caption and the picture is slight, but in the context of the story it explains their fanatical use and enjoyment of this device elsewhere. Figure 15 from this comic explores this tool more visually, using David's portrait of the French revolutionary Marat. Appropriating the portrait of a heroic martyr turns the main

character, Chico D, into a martyr and also a hero; yet the message of the story is that he is not a hero but a victim. This double attribution, of victim and hero, is consistent with Bitterkomix's sympathies, illustrated throughout their work, of identification with or at least concern for the underdog.

Especially indicative of this stance is Joe Dog's adaptation of a text by Jello Biafra, Nag van die Wit Skrik. It is a factual story, with a serious subject. (A general rule is that the more Afrikaans used, the less whimsical the comic tends to be.) The artwork is busy, nervous and scratchy, with few clear negative spaces. Remnants of psychedelic artwork, especially in terms of lettering, are present [fig 16]. This is sparse enough to contribute to the tension, not distract from it.



Figure 16 Dog Nag van die Wit Skrik p3

There is new artist featured in issue two, a woman, Ina van Zyl. Her work stands out, as it does in Gif (an "Afrikaans sekscomic" produced by the same artists between issues 2

and 3 of Bitterkomix). Her work is separate, but is introduced at this point in the analysis because it is useful for an understanding of all the artists' work to compare them.

Van Zyl is less interested in deconstruction than synthesis. She wants to express her vision of reality, without overtly examining the methods. So in the end her work is more conventional, by sticking to narrative forms, than Botes' and Dog's, which have a greater appearance of conventionality. They use narrative forms in non-narrative ways in self-reflexive examination.

Die Besoek is a story of inner happenings, serious, with deeper, more pervasive humour than those by Botes or Dog. The tone is introspective, fragile, innocent, and naive. The story, as personal as some in the first issue, is striking in its intimacy. Joe Dog's Nag van die Wit Skrik is as personal, but not as intimate or direct.

The story is less fantastical than the other contributions to the comic. This has something to do with the cartoony character of the men's drawings and Van Zyl's more realistic drawings, reinforced by an everyday setting. Her work lacks the decorativeness that is characteristic of early Bitterkomix.

Verbal interruptions are kept to a minimum, and the dialogue is factual and sober. The verbal aspect of her work is typified by the brandnames [fig 17] which are realistic; the story is told in pictures, so the brandnames, like the words, are what they are. This is very unlike more typical Bitterkomix stories (A Perfect Little Consumer, for example) in which brandnames are altered and every word refers to several ideas at once. In Botes and Dog's comics, words are skittish and elusive in the employ of frenetic crossreferencing.

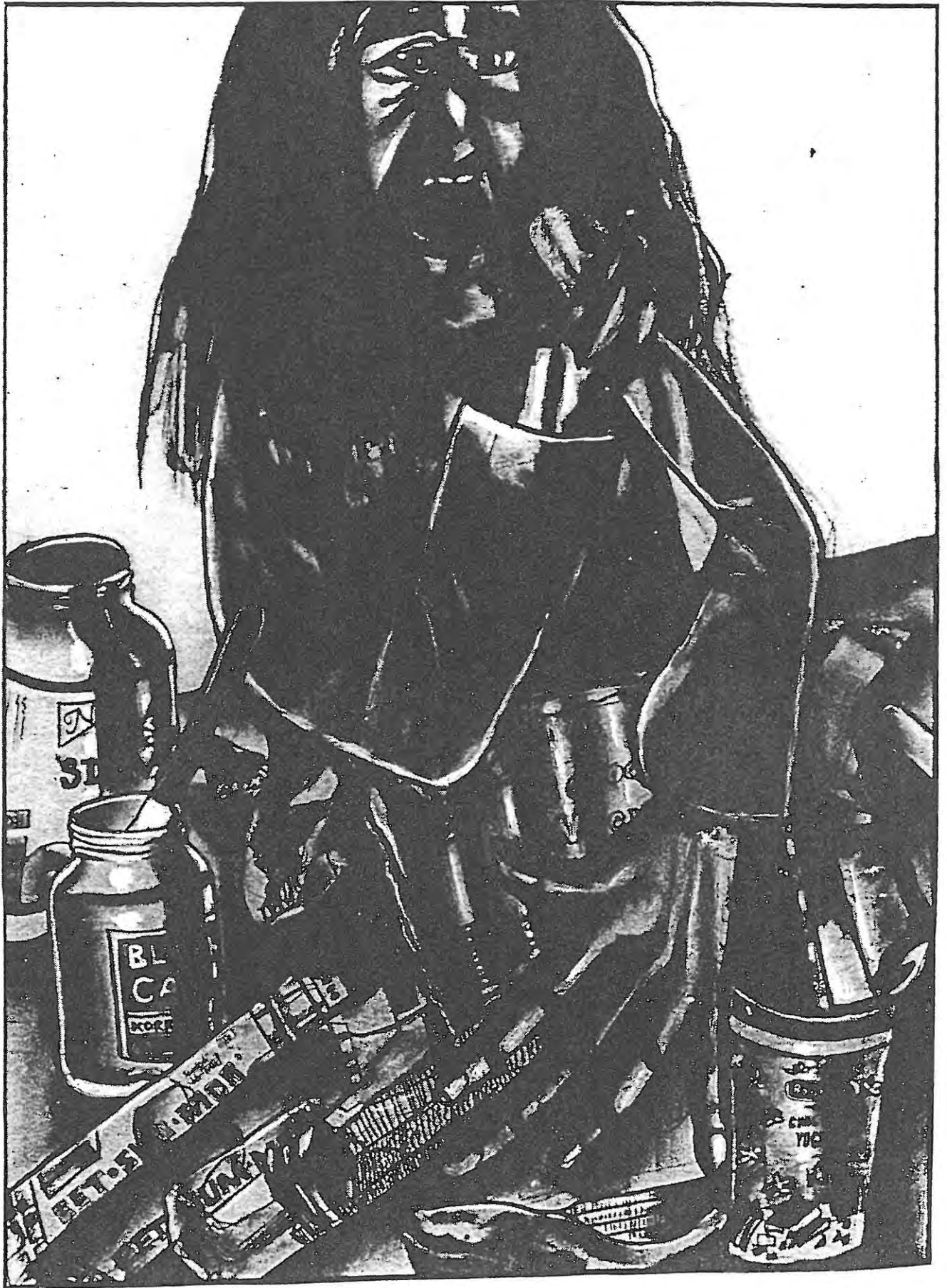


Figure 17 Van Zyl Die Besoek p5

Die Besoek is a simple, direct, blatant, perhaps one-dimensional story, made compelling by its gloomy atmosphere and the main character's mysterious motivations. Apparently a simple personal story, rather than a manipulation of elements to express an idea, the central emotions are laid bare, and by a simplistic treatment examined as mysterious in themselves.

The drawing style is beautifully suited to the nervous, neurotic, tortured, yet banal theme of the story. One constant motif is hands that are powerful but do not touch, that are stiff, suggesting a childish helplessness, in stark contrast to the sophistication of the other artists. Thoughts are depicted as pictures floating above the heads of the characters [fig 18] so that pictorially the thoughts are as real as the people and the overwhelmingly subjective aspect of the whole encounter is emphasized.

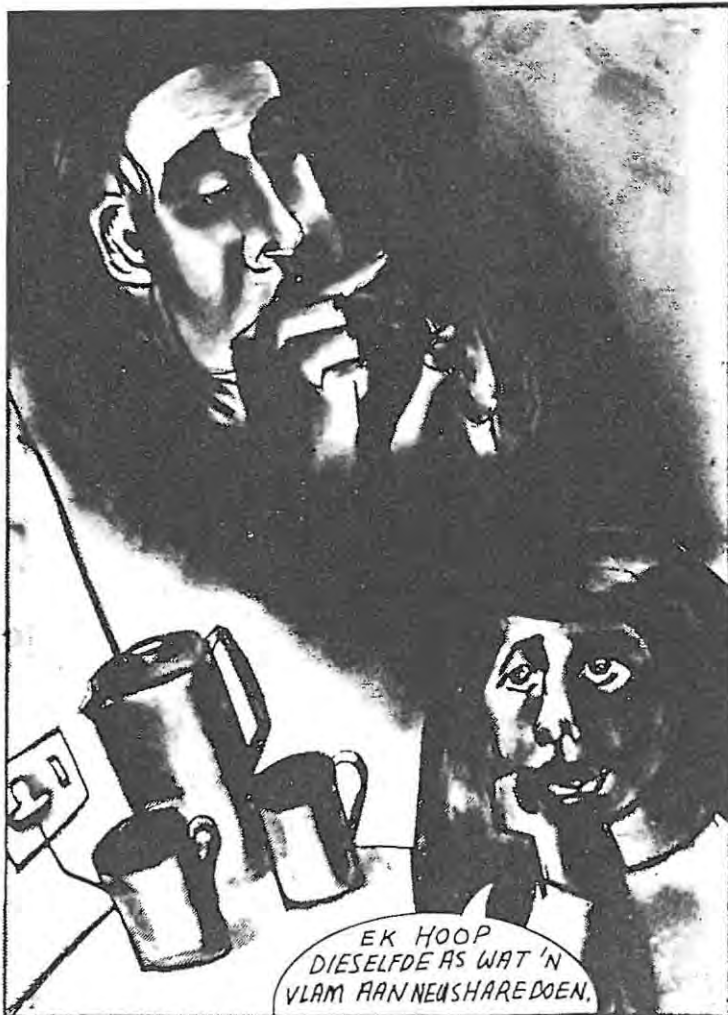


Figure 18 Van Zyl Die Besoek p3

The transitions between panels are transitions of mood. Nothing happens. Yet they are also transitions of action, because nothing happens over and over again, so that successive frames are not functioning as scenesetters, cinematically, but are narrating a lack of events.

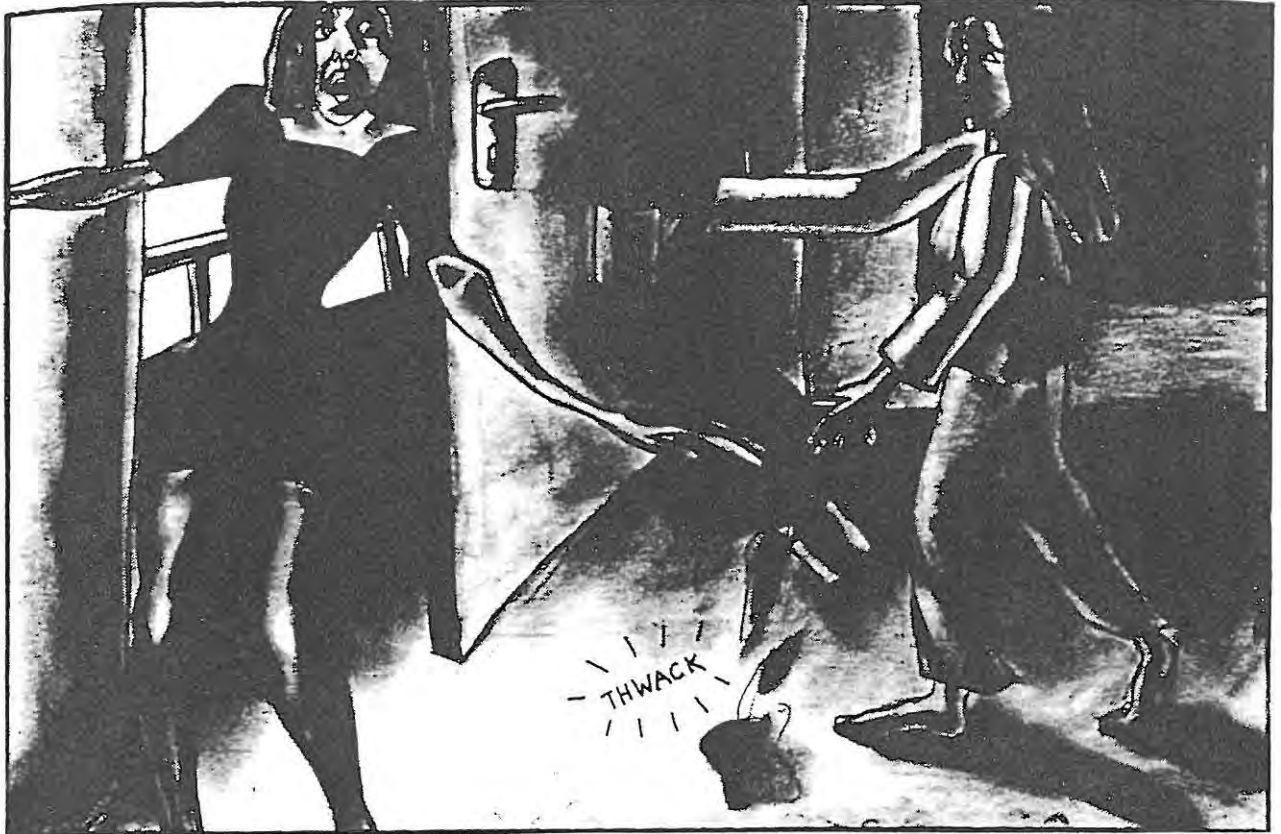


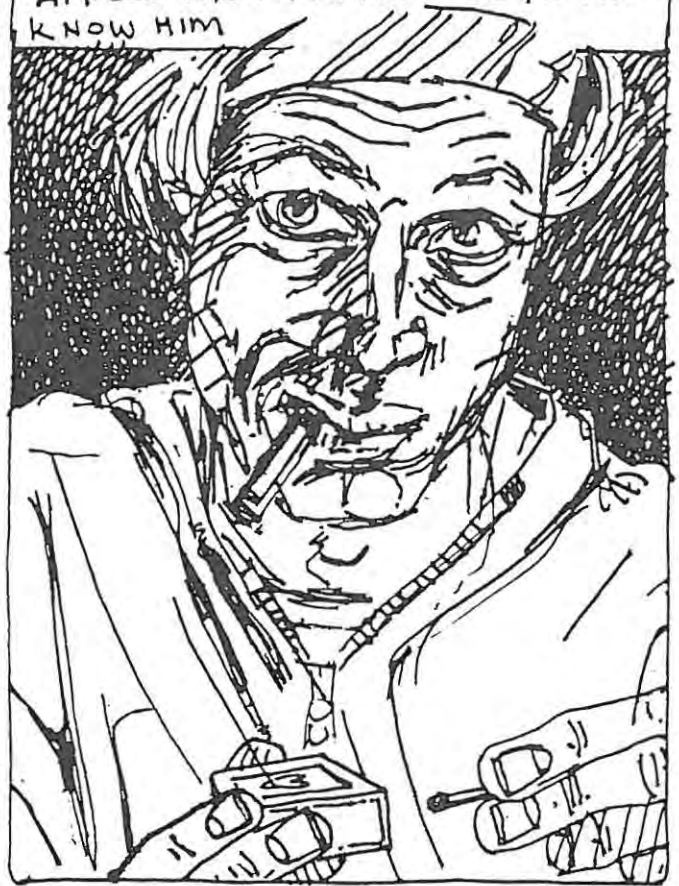
Figure 19 Van Zyl Die Besoek p4

The one soundeffect 'thwack' [fig 19] does not work. It is read as a word, an English word, rather than heard as a sound. Perhaps it is because the story is in Afrikaans and so unlike a comic, that this conventional comic element stands out. All the action happens in a shallow space, indeed a vacuum, and is depicted visually without suggestions of sounds or smells or even textures. Perhaps the inclusion of the soundeffect was intended to produce a moment of shock, a climax, but the next frame has more impact

SO WHAT WAS JULIA TO ME?



I MEAN, HOW DID HIS DEATH AFFECT ME ... AFTER ALL, I DIDN'T KNOW HIM



WELL ... **THIS** IS WHAT HAPPENED ONE SUNDAY MORNING IN LATE NOVEMBER ...



simply by its silence and inexplicability. To assume that an element will work in a comic simply because it is a comic convention is hopeful, but a desperate hope that is here disproved. This particular frame also demonstrates, by its lack, the skill needed to smoothly combine words and pictures in a purely visual medium.

Returning to Dog's work, it seems that his more surreal stories like A Boy Called Julia owe much to literature, especially in terms of narrative style.

A Boy Called Julia: Part 1 contains a single instance of direct communication, even to the extent of timing an appropriate speaking pause [fig 20]. The drawings show a specific face because it is a portrait of the narrator and also a portrait of the artist. This passage highlights the artificiality and chaos of the rest of the comic, which is represented as reality in the story. This is another deconstructive device; it could be used to make the comic more real, but instead it is used to make the comic more surreal.

Bitterkomix 3 (Pulp vir Papkoppies) and 4 (Verkoop Jou Siel vir Security) contain work by several outside contributors, and much more formal experimentation. Do a Dance for Daddy, Die Mens and Siembamba are all illustrated texts. These lead into purely visual exercises, storyless stories which are a more systematic exploration of the mechanisms of comics: Verdwaalde Harte, Rewerie, Alcohol, Myself and my Heroes, and, in more extended form, Die Hero van die Bitch. Botes and Dog each produce a longer comic that combine this experimentation with a narrative: Klapmuts Polisie Slaan Toe, by Botes, and A Discreet Selection from the Proverbs of Hell, by Dog.

Do a Dance for Daddy is an illustrated poem, and a collaboration between Joe Dog and Claudette Schreuders. Meaning is generated by the almost arbitrary connections between the words and the pictures. The two texts, verbal and visual, comment on each other by

surprising juxtapositions. This mechanism, of juxtaposition and contradiction, is highlighted by the combination of Dog's linear pen drawings and Schreuders' photographic pencil drawings. Do a Dance for Daddy recontextualises the original poem by including elements that refer to a specifically South African situation [fig 21]. The poem is rewritten in classic Bitterkomix style: the subject is the horror of Afrikaans culture, and the depiction relies on a wealth of references and significant details.

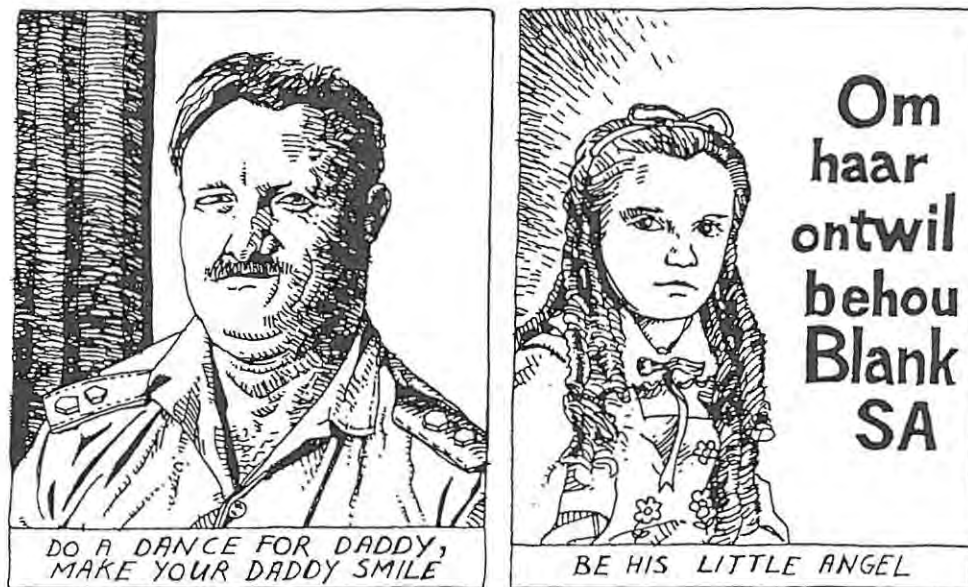


Figure 21 Dog Do a Dance for Daddy p1

Die Mens [fig 22], by Botes, is fresher and more original than Do a Dance for Daddy. Its format is similar, being an illustrated rhyme, but the pictures and the words form two parallel texts, echoing each other. The illustrations refine the meaning of the text, and pin down one possible interpretation of it. In clarifying the text and drawing details from it, the pictures are given such substance that they could stand alone and still convey the essence of the comic. Die Mens is more concise and limited, and therefore more forceful than Do a Dance for Daddy.

DIE MENS deur onraad botes



WAT IS DIE MENS?

VEL, BEEN EN PENS.



BARS DIE PENS...



... VREK DIE MENS.



Figure 22 Botes Die Mens

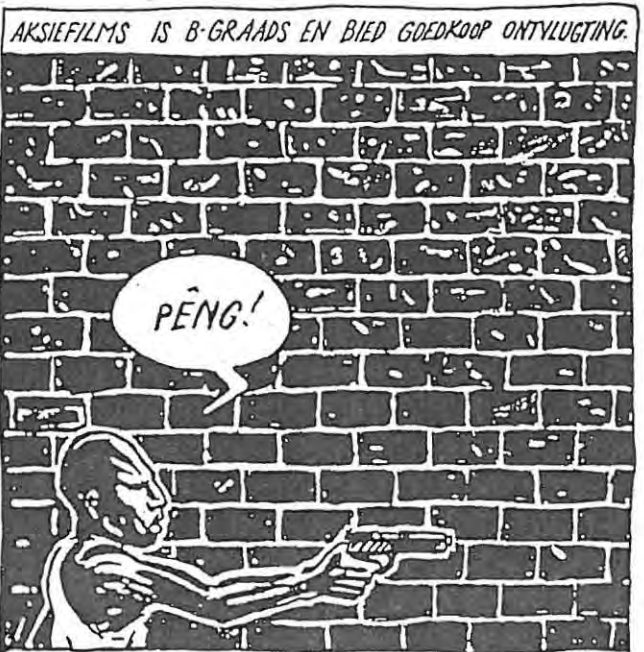


Figure 23 Botes Verdwaalde Harte p2

Verdwaalde Harte [fig 23], also by Botes, is a visual list of characters, each frame a portrait of a person caught in some descriptive action. Every frame is captioned with a single sentence, some descriptive of the contents, while others are more generalised comments. All the frames are apparently unrelated to each other; but the creation of this list in a comic format makes them interdependent. Simply because of their collection as a comic, the frames generate a meaning between them, that is different from their individual meanings. Each one's meaning is further modified by its place in the list, its sequential position.

Dog and Dirk Winterbach's Rewerie is similar to Verdwaalde Harte, in that it consists of a series of apparently unconnected frames, like thoughts passing randomly through someone's mind. Lack of writing makes the pictures more ambiguous, but also strengthens the connections between them, because meaning must be deduced from their interrelationship, not from their relation to a text. Each frame is a statement in itself; but its meaning is limited by its position in the series [fig 24]. The information contained within a frame is subordinate to its position. An overtly photographic quality in the drawings reduces them to the level of clichéd received images [fig 25]. They become signs or symbols rather than illustrations.

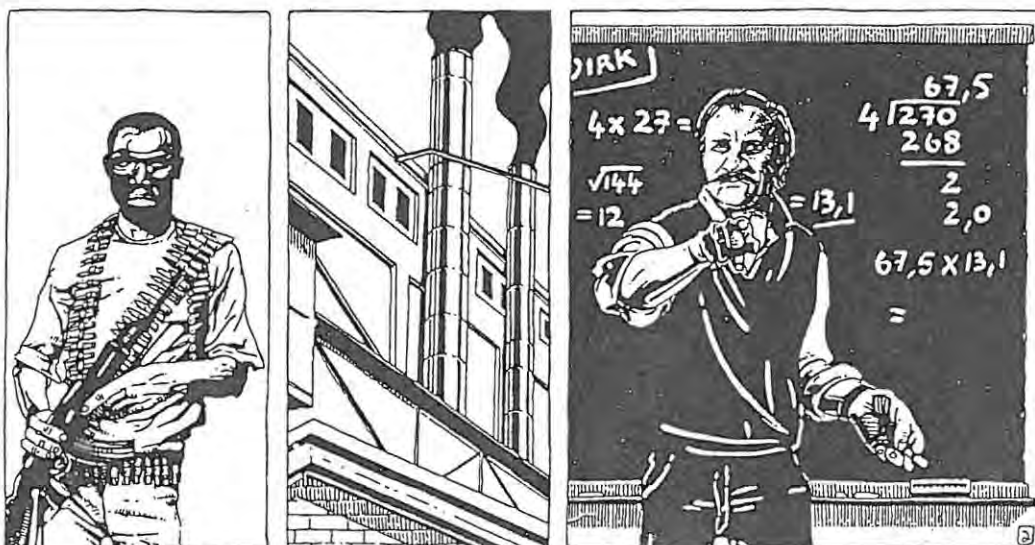


Figure 24 Dog, Winterbach Rewerie p2 (reduced)



Figure 25 Dog, Winterbach Rewerie p1 (reduced)

A fragment of the first frame is repeated, reversed, in the last frame, enclosing the comic as the opening and closing sentences of an argument enclose the argument [figs 26,27]. The frames are placed in series like sentences in a paragraph. In this comic visual communication mimics the structure of verbal language, and becomes a different language. Visually the comic functions and is arranged and is read the same way as written text is; visual replaces verbal explicitly, not implicitly as it does in a traditional narrative comic. Without creating a separate reality, this comic still exists between the frames, behind the page, in the composite statement that is generated, not in the frames themselves. It lies in the motion of reading and the act of connecting the frames into a seamless whole.

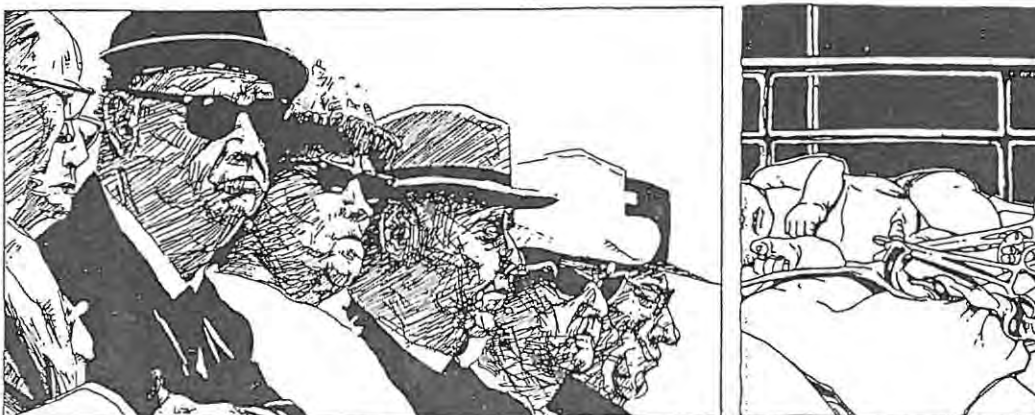


Figure 26 Dog, Winterbach Rewerie p1 (reduced)

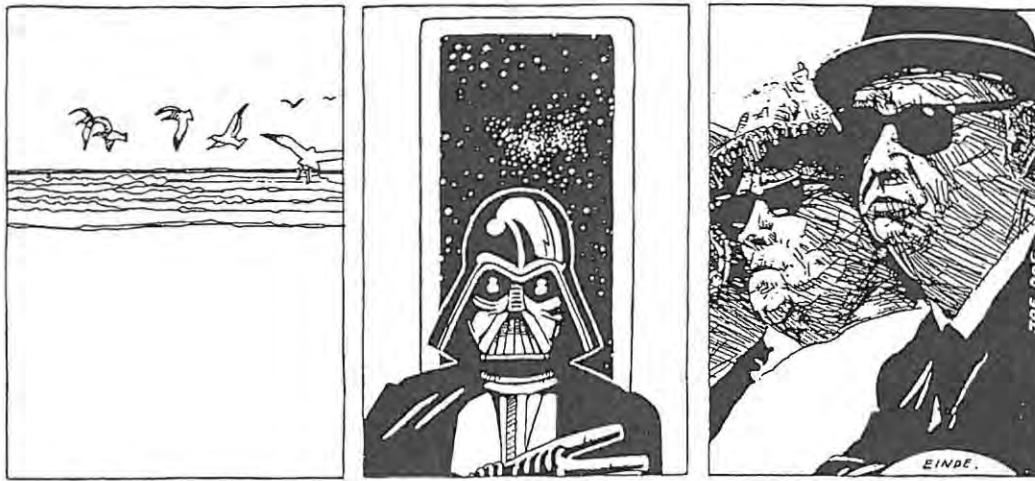


Figure 27 Dog, Winterbach Rewerie p3 (reduced)

Dog's Myself and my Heroes [fig 28] is a visual essay, in the form of a list. Details are tongue in cheek, and all commentary and opinions are expressed visually, through caricature.

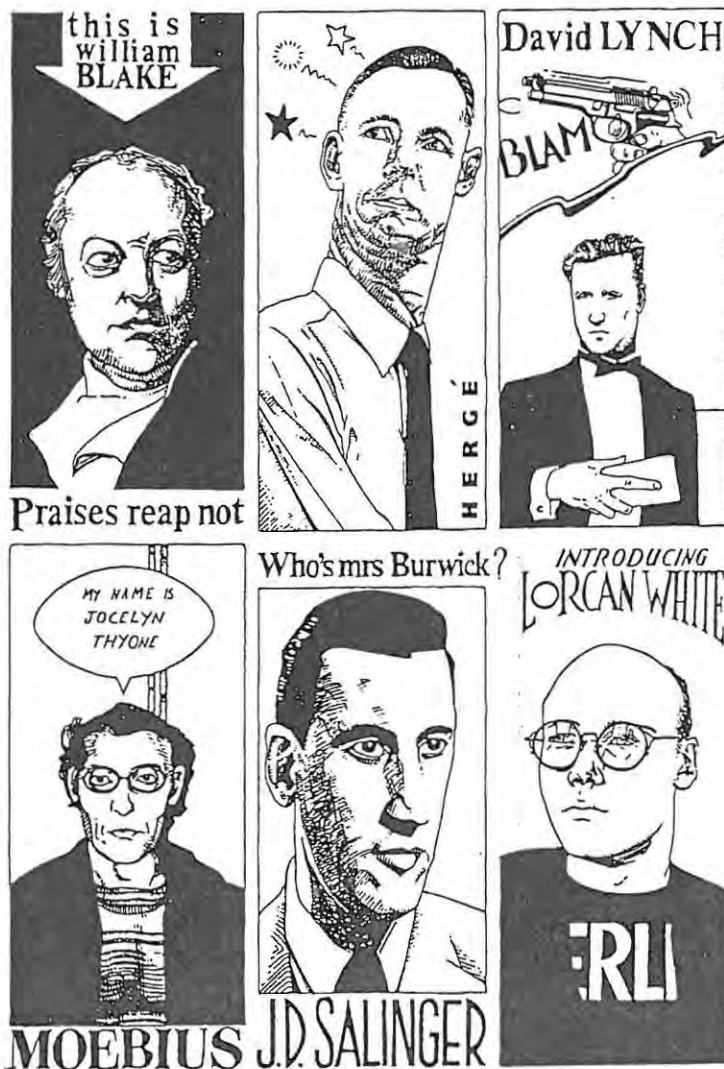


Figure 28 Dog Myself and my Heroes p2 (reduced)

DIE HERO VAN DIE BITCH



'n Action Verhaal
opgedra aan **STET**

deur Joe Dog



In Die Hero van die Bitch [fig 29], Dog has taken an advertising comic and altered the text. This is a classic satirical technique, widely used in underground comics. The original strip frequently appears in mainstream American comics, and is therefore immediately associated with trashy comics, to the extent that it is virtually shorthand for these comics. Dog reduces the plot, such as it is, to nonsense, which is in itself a comment on mainstream comics, ridiculing them by association. The altered text is completely self-referential. In the fourth frame, a character comments on his own seemingly implausible actions, making them even more ludicrous. Die Hero van die Bitch is a bad comic made interesting, exploring just how bad a comic can be by examining what comics are. Subversion of a very familiar text forces the reader to notice the structure of the comic, rather than to believe in its reality. It is a joke within a joke, and a joke about a joke too.

With the subtitle of Alcohol [fig 30], Dog states explicitly how this comic is constructed, and why it is constructed in this way. It is a visual poem, which is not the same as an illustrated poem. The difference, however, does lie in the illustrations: the comic starts with text which is ostensibly illustrated, and then loses the text and turns into pure illustration. The first three frames could be construed as representations of reality, but the last two are collages, constructed from a combination of photograph and drawing. Each is composed of various disparate elements thrown together, and such meaning as they have is generated by their context and especially their juxtaposition.

Unlike Dog's other non-narrative comics, this one is not merely a visual list. The frames are clearly sequential, with each one containing elements from the preceding one.

Dog also includes instructions to read the comic to background music, in other words, to a soundtrack. This kind of note is common in comics like Love and Rockets and Tankgirl, where the 'soundtrack' is often listed after the drawing and writing credits. It

alcohol



'n visuele gedig - i.dog

LEES MET HARDE AGTERGRONDMUSIEK - VERKIESLIK "WISH I WAS IN EL SALVADOR" DEUR JELLO BIAFRA EN D.O.A.

EEN NAG IN 'N KROEG...



DIE MAN MAAK SY TAS OOP...



Figure 30 Dog Alcohol

draws the reader's attention to the silence of a comic, something that is usually not noticed because of the way speech bubbles work: we "hear" the words written in the bubbles. Part of the illusion created by a comic is due to the deliberate masking of its silence. Dog's instruction makes the comic a complete thing in itself, rather than a mere means of communication. In conventional comics, the real comic exists in the gaps between the frames, in the illusion it creates. One of the results of deconstructing a comic is that it exists only within the frames, only on the page. Dog's comics do not often work by existing in the gaps between the frames; but neither do they exist only on the page. The real comic in his comic exists in the underlying idea. It exists in the meanings generated by the placing of disparate elements. It exists in the gaps of meaning between these elements, the way conventional comics exist in the gaps between the frames. The closure in Dog's comics is not physical but intellectual. In the visual poem the inclusion of a soundtrack completes the closure.

Jan Brand, by Dog, is a lighthearted satire of a common prejudice against comics: the notion that they are trash that destroy one's mind. Dog's hero, Jan Brand, however, goes mad and achieves some kind of revelation through the reading of comics.

Dog's method of layering meanings is exposed when the comic that Jan is reading is seen to be the same comic that we are reading [fig 31]. Another aspect of Dog's writing is revealed in the depiction of Jan's father as Darth Vader (a film character). Beyond the characterisation of the father that is implied by this substitution, it illustrates Jan's subordination to pop culture: he can only see reality in terms of preconceived cultural concepts. It suggests a similar reason for Dog's piecing together of his comics from other sources.

It is a comic of concepts. The drawings illustrate salient parts of the text, together

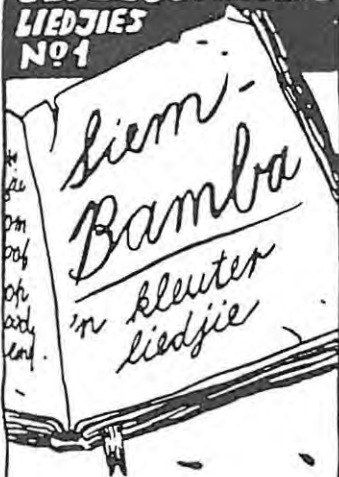
constructing a reality, but not the continuous visual reality of, for instance, Van Zyl's work. Dog never escapes from an overt awareness of the mechanics of the comic, nor does he let the reader forget this. Botes, Van Zyl, and in fact most of the artists examined in this thesis, strive to persuade their readers to believe in the reality they are creating.



Figure 31 Dog Jan Brand (reduced)

Botes illustrates a traditional Afrikaans nursery rhyme, Siembamba quite literally, exploiting the gruesome nature of the lyrics [fig 32]. The extreme cartoonlike violence is taken directly from the text. The rhyme originated in Boer War concentration camps, and is therefore something of a holy cow. Afrikaans nursery rhymes are icons for purists.

BITTERKOMIX BIED AAN
GEÏLLUSTREERDE
LIEDJES
NO 1

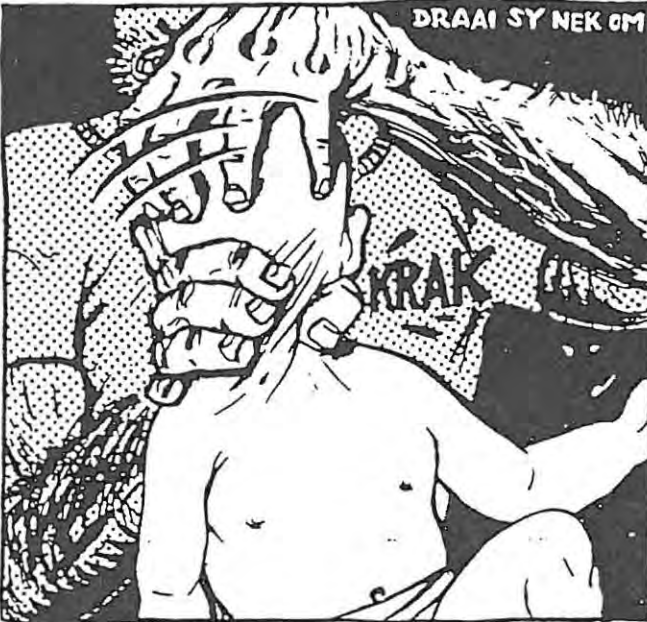


deur Conrad Botes '94.

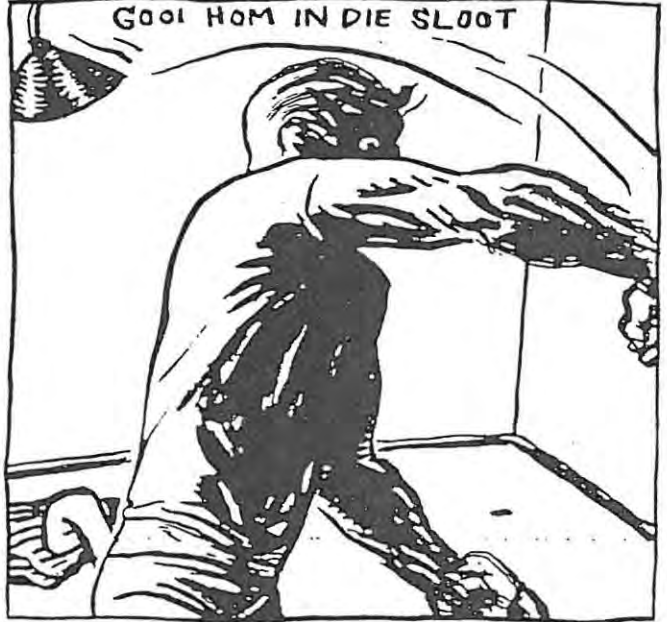
SIEMBAMBA, MAMMA SE KINDJIE



SIEMBAMBA, MAMMA SE KINDJIE



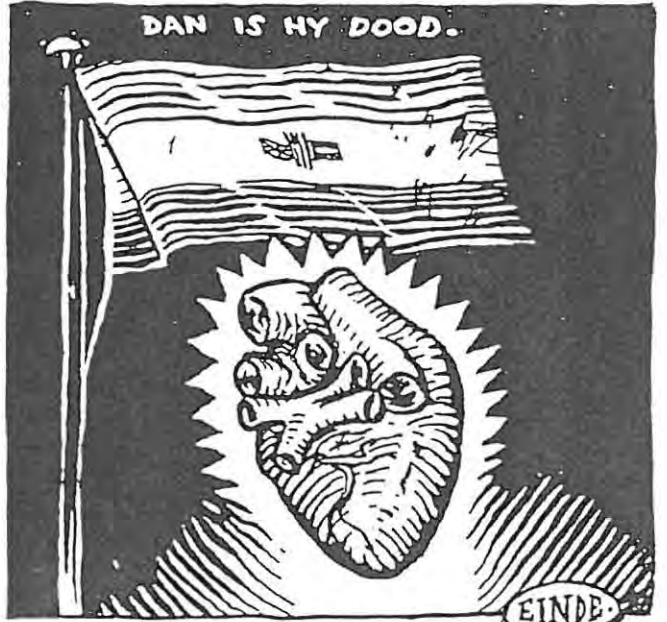
DRAAI SY NEK OM



GOOI HOM IN DIE SLOOT



TRAP OP SY KOP



DAN IS HY DOOD.

EINDE.

Figure 32 Botes Siembamba

By taking the words at face value, and providing a modern context for an historical reality, Botes mocks those who exalt its origin and existence without paying attention to its contents.

This kind of satire is a form of revenge on Afrikaans culture, an examination and a reclamation, because although Bitterkomix mocks Afrikaners relentlessly, the artists also attach value to certain aspects of their culture.

Proverbs of Hell is an extract from William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell illustrated and interpreted by Dog.

Max Plant, who is already known and recognisable to readers because he appears elsewhere in the comic, is featured as a kind of narrator. The proverbs are seen as his thoughts, the story as an exploration of his psyche [fig 33]. He functions as a stand-in for the artist, like a pseudonym; Max Plant illustrating Dog.

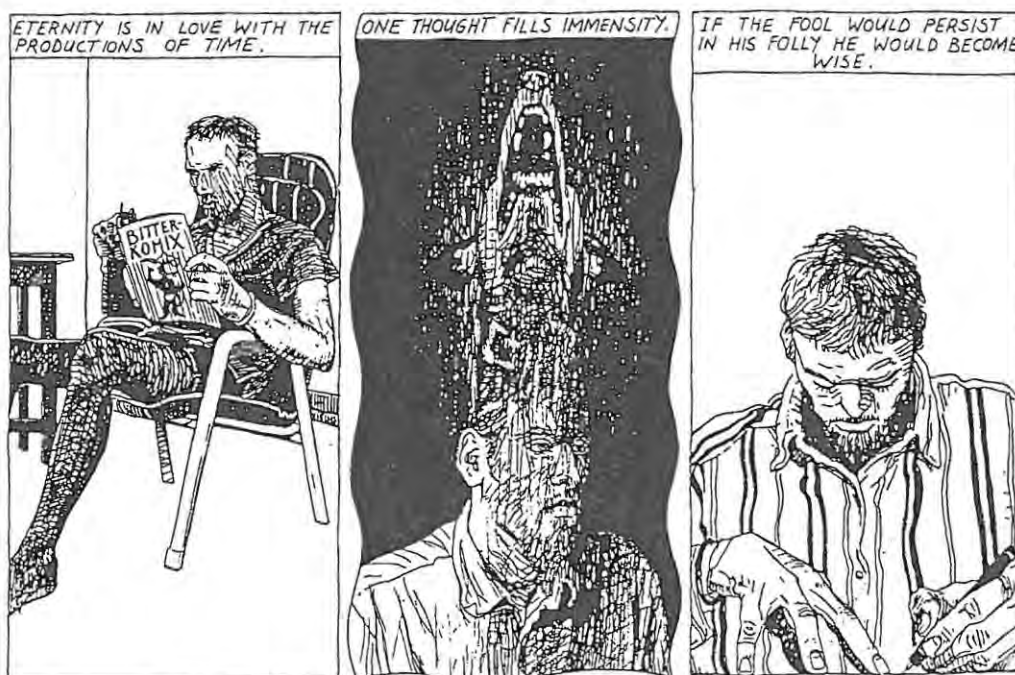


Figure 33 Dog Proverbs of Hell p1 (reduced)

The Proverbs are selected and reinterpreted in terms of the art of creating comics [fig 34]. This is the artist's manifesto, an explanation of the way he works. Using the same structure Botes used in *Die Mens*, with each frame corresponding to a proverb, Dog works from the general to the specific. Although the text and the pictures describe the same thing, the pictures are more specific, and offer a personal interpretation or application of the text.



Figure 34 Dog *Proverbs of Hell* p3 (reduced)

Dog makes a story of a confession, as he does in A Short and Feeble Affair, which is a literacised recollection of an ostensibly personal experience. Although he is revealing something of his own mind, he hides behind someone else's words and someone else's face.

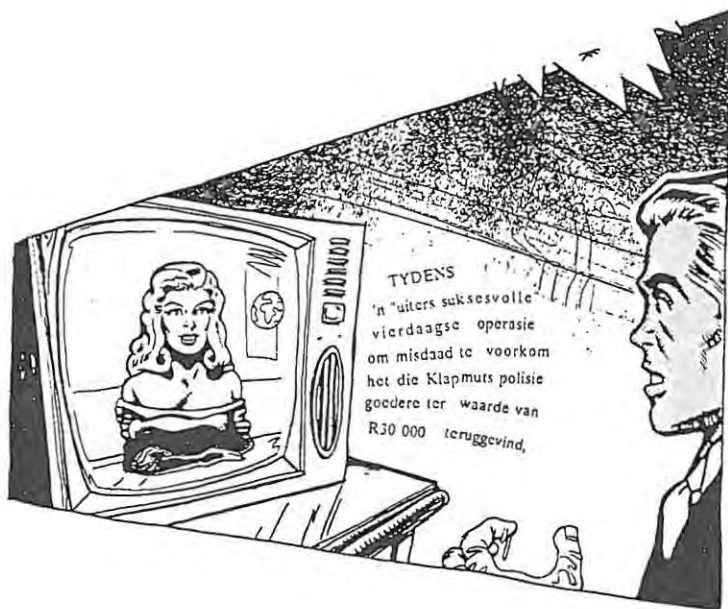


Figure 35 Botes Klapmuts Polisie Slaan Toe p1 (reduced)

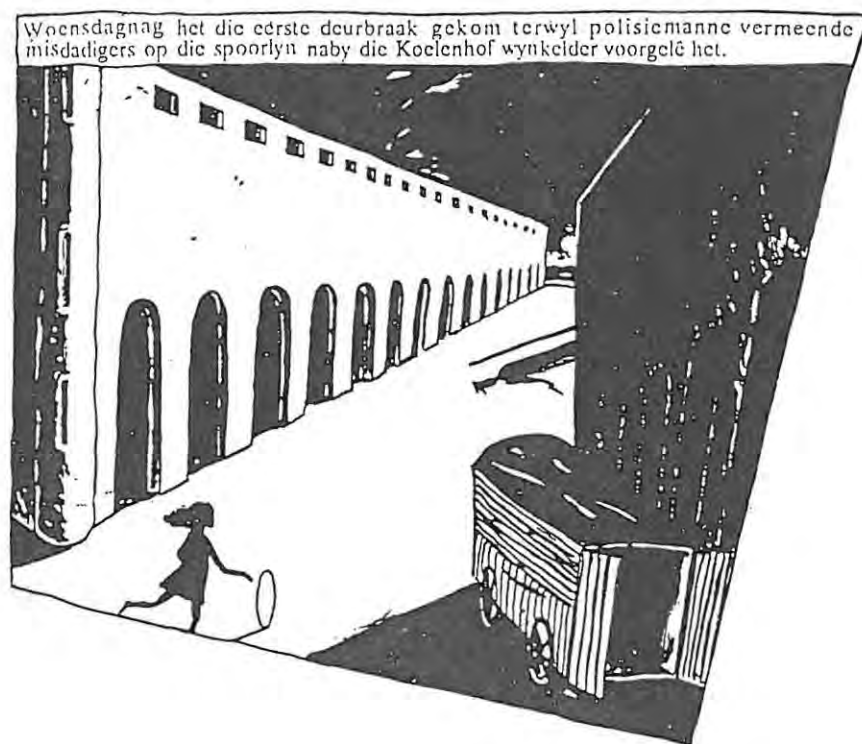


Figure 36 Botes Klapmuts Polisie Slaan Toe p3 (reduced)

In Klapmuts Polisie Slaan Toe, Botes tries his hand at Dog's more literary approach, turning a newsreport into a visual essay [fig 35]. He draws on many sources to convey his message, including Surrealism, adapting a de Chirico painting [fig 36] for one of the frames.

We are forced to read between the lines of newsprint and accept them as a mad rant, as Botes turns this dry account into a metaphor for a surreal world loaded with sex and death and perversion and absurd fragments of humour [fig 37].



Figure 37 Botes Klapmuts Polisie Slaan Toe p4 (reduced)

Klapmuts takes to an extreme conceits used in other stories. By exaggeration and extrapolation, Botes exposes the lack of sense of this rational report of an irrational world. In other comics, literary fragments and visual references add texture and depth to a plot; here they are the sole means of communication. An elliptical page layout and a dizzying combination of elements create an atmosphere of confusion and disorientation, more emotional, violent, and bitter than the similar disorientaion Dog describes in A Boy Called Julia.



HANNA WEET DAT LISA SEKER EENDAG SAL
KRALETTJES INRYG OM 'N BESTAAN TE MAAK.



HANNA VRA VIR LISA WANNEER SY DAN
'N KLEINBASIE HUIS TOE BRING.



DIT MAAK LISA SEER.



HANNA SÊ DIS OMDAT LISA SO VET IS
DAT SY NIE 'N KLEINBASIE KAN KRY NIE.

Ina van Zyl is more concerned with people than with ideas, her comics being emotional rather than intellectual. Prossies, although continuing both the themes of eating and social relationships, is more narrative than previous comics, as the story is more complete [fig 38]. The thrust of the story is conveyed through changes in atmosphere and tone, not action. The main character stares at the reader much of the time, in closeup, microscopic, claustrophobic frames. Text, consisting of the character's thoughts, and pictures are not completely integrated, which adds to the uncomfortable stilted air of the encounter. Van Zyl's stories are exactly that: encounters with the characters.

Ek Krap Graag in my Neus [fig 39] is illustrated with stark expressive linocuts, in hilarious contrast with the banal commentary provided by the text. In the last frame the character stares at the reader, inviting comment. The confrontational, confessional, personal approach Van Zyl favours is in fact the subject of this comic.



Figure 39 Van Zyl Ek Krap Graag in my Neus (reduced)

Bestaan is a sharply observed interaction that really speaks for itself. It continues the theme of the first story, a theme that runs through all her work, of ordinary social interactions that become incomprehensible when viewed from outside their framework of rules.

Rosie is Nuut contains more characters than Van Zyl's previous comics. It is quiet and contemplative, perhaps because the drawings are very static. The characters are not cartoons, but closely observed people; thus the frames read as a series of illustrations rather than diagrams of events, the way cartoons do [McCloud, 1994, p.90-91]. Inclusion of environments, scenesetting frames, and greater mobility in the characters' actions lessen this effect somewhat, creating a stronger illusion of reality than in previous comics [fig 40].



Figure 40 Van Zyl Rosie is Nuut p5 (reduced)



ROSIE is NUUT

deur Ina van Zyl



The scenesetting frames do not only supply physical details but also contribute towards the dreamy atmosphere [fig 41]. They serve to distance the reader from the action, an effect enhanced by the absence of cartooning. The characters are observed not as if we are part of their world, but from an outside vantage point. Their actions and conversations have a different significance, to us, than the significance they have for the characters themselves. This distancing is a subtle visual equivalent for narrative boxes, and compensates for the lack of narrative comment in the story. Changes of pace are not dramatic, as everything is presented in an even, unjudgemental way. The characters are as important as the ideas they illustrate, and are viewed sympathetically. They are real people as well as tools for expression.

In contrast, A Boy Called Julia: Part 3, by Joe Dog is, although narrative, an exploration of an idea. The overall tone is calm, although the story is about disorientation, mental as well as physical. Almost military precision in the drawing [fig 42] seems to be a desperate attempt at orientation. Yet all these very specific details add up to nothing, emphasising the impossibility of deriving a specific meaning from them [fig 43].



Figure 42 Dog A Boy Called Julia: Part 3 p1 (reduced)

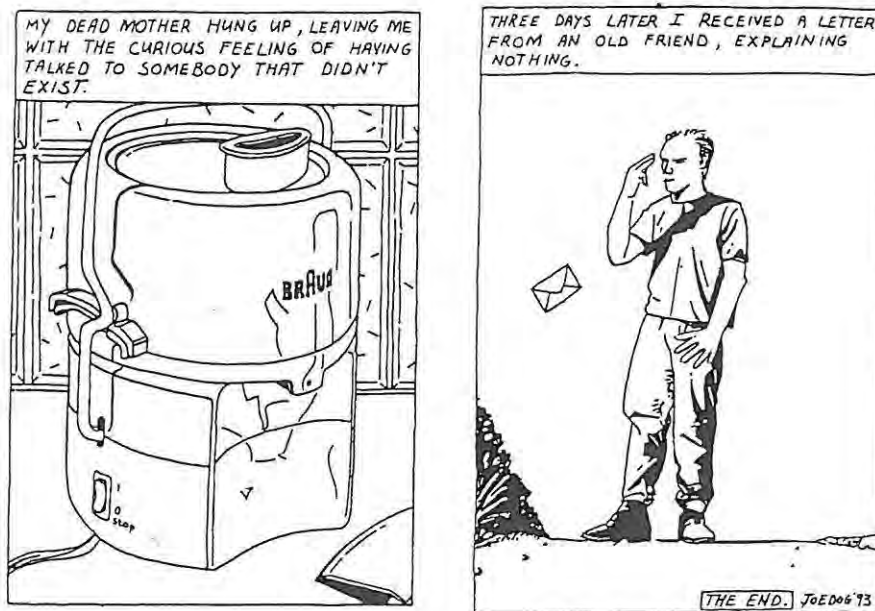


Figure 43 Dog A Boy Called Julia: Part 3 p2 (reduced)

A Boy Called Julia: Part 4, is a skilful collage of received images, structured around a ludicrous plot [fig 44]. It is probably more personal than Proverbs of Hell because it is humorous, and reveals much of his attitude towards comics, what they are and how they work. The story is almost frivolous, indicating that the plot itself is not to be taken too seriously.

It relates to Proverbs, as if it were the next episode, and also to Dog's previous non-sensical one-pagers. Hints that Julia is about Dog's work as a whole are found in references to Gif and Max Plant. All these stories accumulate to form between them a statement about comics and communication. Julia: Part 4 reveals that despite attempts at serious comics, Dog still feels ambivalent about the potential of communicating a message. He rearticulates the bitterness and frustration that filled the first issue of Bitterkomix.

A Boy Called Julia Part 4

JULIA IS CURRENTLY RESIDING ON THE BURMESE FRONTIER (AT THE MOUNTAIN OUTPOST OF SINLUMKABA) WITH HIS FRIEND CARL NELSON. PERSECUTED BY THE AUTHORITIES FOR HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTROVERSIAL GIF, MR. JULIA COULD ONLY RESUME WORK ONCE INTERNATIONAL AGENTS LOST TRACK OF HIM. HIS MOST RECENT PROJECTS INVOLVE A SCI-FI COMIC ABOUT A WHITE ZULU AND SEVERAL WORKSHOPS ON GIF 2. HIS FRIEND MAX PLANT ALSO DROPPED IN FOR A VISIT AND THE TWO ALLEGEDLY ROBBED A GROCERY STORE TO FINANCE BITTERKOMIX 4.



NOW, ISN'T THAT JUST BRILLIANT!?? READ MORE NEXT ISSUE. J. DOG. OCT 94.

Botes is very good at acidic social comment. Sy Skatjie is almost an expanded caricature. He finds humour in absurdly exaggerated depictions of closely observed details of situation, place and person. Events are left to speak for themselves; the story is not explained, and the reader must make his or her own judgements. The artist, while solely responsible for creating the situation, refrains from direct comment. The comic becomes a reality, bolstered by cinematic compositions [fig 45] and closely paced action-to-action transitions. Instead of a bare statement, a story is created that illustrates that statement.



Figure 45 Botes Sy Skatjie (reduced)

From analysis of a relationship [fig 46], Judas, by Botes, evolves into a mystery comic. It is reminiscent of In die Arms van ’n Apokalips, but more successful because of its narrower focus. Narrative control is tighter, yet the drawing is looser, and more violent. The story and drawings are dark, grubby and intense. Botes delights in incidental, realistic details, while at the same time composing frames classically. Slapstick humour is modulated by refinement and depth [fig 47]. Superficially the comic is crude, but the structure is polished. By the end of the episode, it can be seen that the domestic quarrel at the beginning is another incidental detail, of plot, not visual composition, serving the same function as the visual details, strengthening the sense of realism.

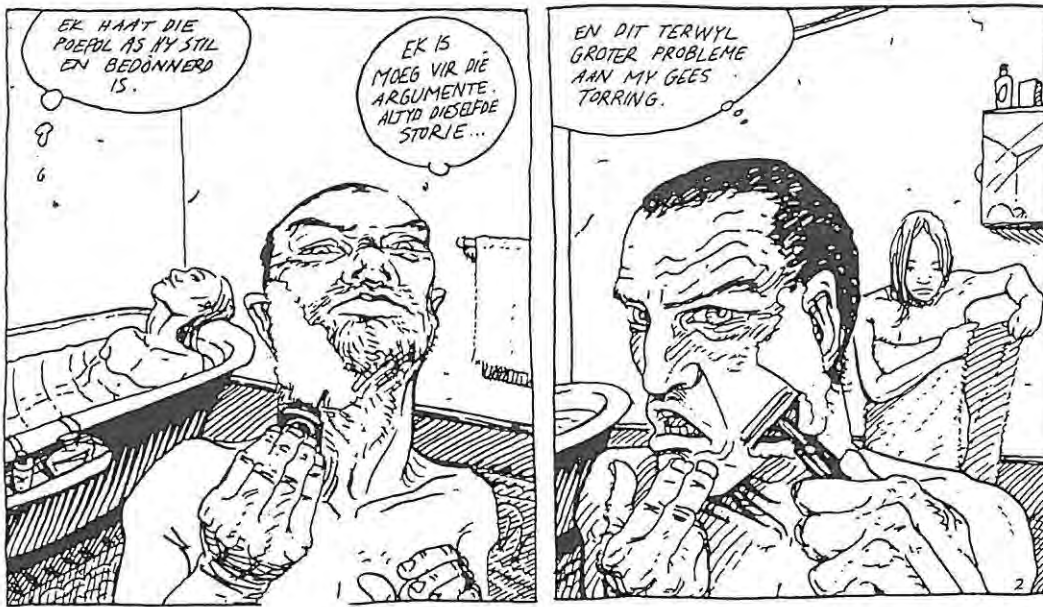


Figure 46 Botes Judas p2 (reduced)



Figure 47 Botes Judas p3 (reduced)

The second episode of Missileman, by Dog, is also drawn in classic comic style. As most of the text consists of conversation, the artist's handling of timing comes under scrutiny [fig 48]. Visually, tone, emphasis and variety are handled by way of focuses and dramatic viewpoints [fig 49]. Dog uses the same kinds of details Botes does in a much more purposeful way. The reader's expectations are carefully built up, but the ending is anticlimactic; all the elements of a conventional action story are present, except the anticipated climax. Missileman is written and drawn like a serious comic, but does not take itself seriously, and becomes a drama over nothing. The most classically narrative and potentially meaningful format that Dog could use is still rendered meaningless.



Figure 48 Dog Missileman p2 (reduced)

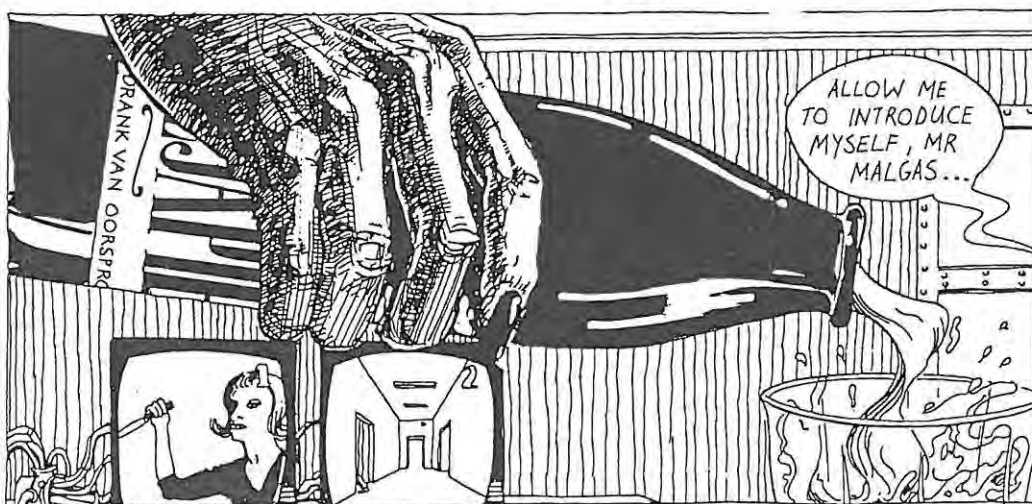


Figure 49 Dog Missileman p3 (reduced)

Walking on Water by Botes is also narrated in a conventional style, but carries its theme through to the end. Botes is becoming concerned with the meaning he can communicate, not just the vehicle. The story is complete over three pages, and ambiguity is due to lack of explicit comment from the artist in terms of editorial or narrative text, not to subversions of the structure. The story is also not explicitly personal. Missileman is in a sense a personal comic because it is very much about comics. Walking on Water has a wider frame of reference.

Realistic Romances are three cynical one page stories by Dog. They read like exercises in comicmaking, a judgement that could extend to more of Dog's work. The first two are like edited comics; the drawings show isolated moments of action, snapshots illustrating a text [fig 50]. The third is more cinematic. This seems to be a major dichotomy in Dog's comics, as he wavers between literary or cinematic approaches. It is even a major difference between Botes and Dog. Dog errs on the literary side, while Botes is more traditionally cinematic. Dog's stories tend to be contemplative, dwelling on silent significant moments, and texts tend to be narrator oriented. Botes is story and character oriented, trying to create the illusion of a self-sufficient world that is only partially revealed through description in his comic. Dog's comic world exists only for the comic.

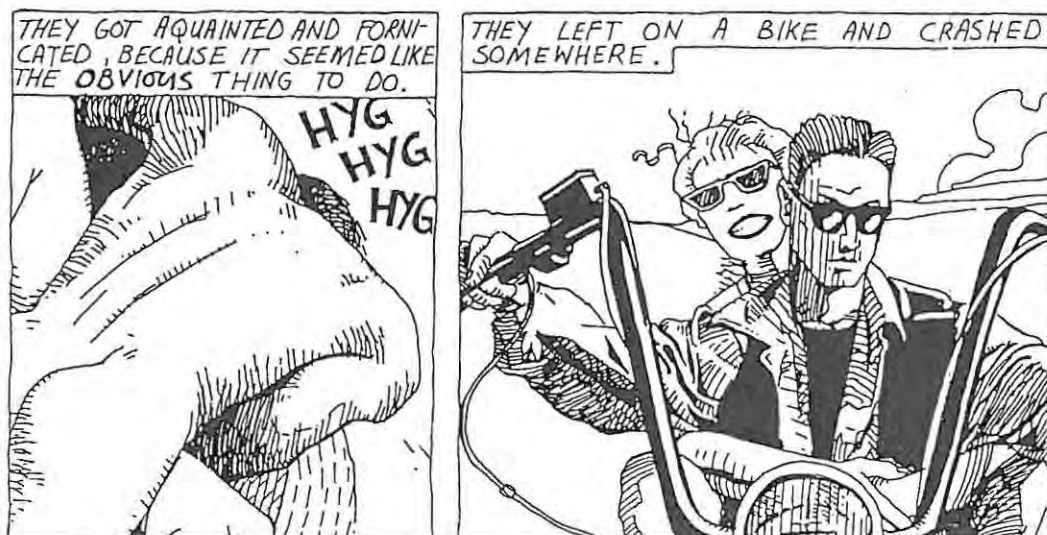


Figure 50 Dog Realistic Romances p1

In Kanker Botes' subject is again the psyche of the Afrikaner. His drawings have become progressively more primitive, violent, and grotesque. The lushness and sensuality of heavy, flowing black lines contrasts with the bleakness of the story, and suggests a kind of black humour underlying the tragedy. Depictions of characters are almost caricatures, and farcical expressions and details emphasize the grimness of the plot [fig 51].

In Dog's deconstructive comics, pace tends to be uniform throughout, as befits an academic exercise. Pace is the visual equivalent of narrative tone, and cinematic pacing makes the story more realistic. In Kanker Botes is trying to convey meaning through a narrative of events, and the pace changes rapidly following the demands of the plot. (Photographic cropping further enhances the illusion of realism). As the climax is reached, action is condensed, and the pace increases. On page 4 of the comic [fig 51], tension is built through slow, step by step action; the time depicted almost corresponds to the time it takes to read these frames. In the last dramatic frame, more than one action is depicted in the same frame; fewer frames correspond to the same reading time. Pace increases and drama is heightened.

Thus the events of the story create its reality and its message visually.

Surprisingly, A Short and Feeble Affair by Dog is similar to Van Zyl's stories in spirit and mood. Dog employs the same sparseness of drawing as Van Zyl; while Botes' drawings sometimes have an almost hallucinatory intensity of detail, Dog and Van Zyl concentrate only on the necessary.

A Short and Feeble Affair has the same structure as Kanker, with a prologue and ending and an action-packed middle. However, the transition from one section to the next is not indicated by a change of pace. Instead, the entire method of storytelling changes. This

EK HET IN DIE DONKER PROBEER OM HOM WAKKER TE MAAK.



PA!
PA!



HUH!
WAT
JY!



JY'S GESUIP!
JOU SKIET EK!

HY HET DIE PISTOOL ONDER SY KUSSING GEGRYP EN EK HET HOM BEGIN WURG.



KGA

ONS HET BEGIN STOEI EN EK HET HARDER GEWURG, MAAR HY'T DIE PISTOOL NIE LAAT LOS NIE.



GOD!
HOU OP!

coincides with the appearance of the narrator in the frames; what has happened is that the intensity of the narrator's memory has changed. The action is narrated step by step, mimicking real time [fig 52]. The text and pictures reflect each other accurately, then diverge after the climax of the story, just as they converged after the prologue. In the first and last sections the visual narration is schematic and cartoony (even including written labels), despite realistic drawing [see fig 6]. It is as if the beginning and ending have been literacised, then combined with a more cinematic approach. The change of style is so abrupt as to jar slightly; the combination of the two styles is unusual in Dog's work.

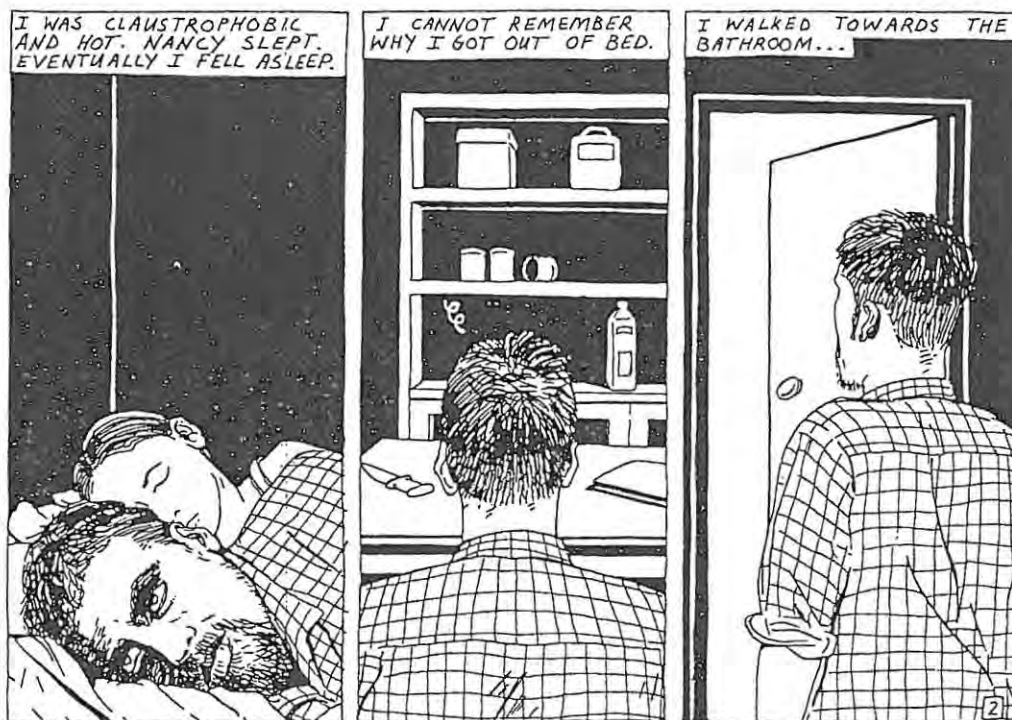


Figure 52 Dog A Short and Feeble Affair p2 (reduced)

In Jeugweerbaarheid Dog uses the conventional narrative format, and the action is more consciously cinematic. The first page is closely sequential; as the narrating character speaks, the viewpoint changes in the manner of a camera shift in a film [fig 53]. The drawings are photographically realistic and denser.



Figure 53 Dog Jeugweerbaarheid p1 (reduced)

This is the third Max Plant adventure; he serves the same function as the narrator in A Boy Called Julia, but that narrator was a self-portrait. Plant is a portrait. The comics are ostensibly accounts of his experiences, rather than those of the artist. He is a real person (in the comic sense) with consistent and particular attributes.

In this comic Dog is concerned with more than the mechanics of comics. Although he still uses many references to and quotations from other sources to support his argument, these are subtly inserted into an account of reality, rather than a comic construction. The overall effect is that of conventional illustration.

What Goes Around by Botes is pure scatological humour. The comic is a crude yet sophisticated critique of society. Botes uses the techniques of American underground comics of the 1960s, in which the deliberate crudity is part of the critique, being a refusal to engage with the object of derision on its terms.

The narration is purely visual, with panoramic views and closeups and peeks through windows. The plot is constructed like a classic argument, with thesis, expansion, and closing statement similar to thesis but more comprehensive. This is partially achieved through layout, specifically by changes in frame size emphasizing particular moments. But the greater part of the structure is articulated through viewpoint. The story begins in

closeup, then pulls away to explain at length and in great detail; the first frame contains all the information contained in the comic, but it is condensed. The last page comes back to the main character: the last frame is the same as the first, but viewed from the opposite angle, because the question posed at the beginning has been answered.

When I Came Here First [fig 54], a one-pager by Dog, has a blandness that is arresting. In Proverbs of Hell, Dog explained himself by means of objects and acts, the way a conventional narrative explains its underlying idea. When I Came Here First is, however, a very literal extended self-portrait, pushing the non-narrative comic to an extreme. The text heads to a conclusion, and the drawings mimic it with progressive closeups of the face. Yet this face does not get clearer; it starts to disintegrate, becoming abstract, because there is no difference in the amount of detail presented.

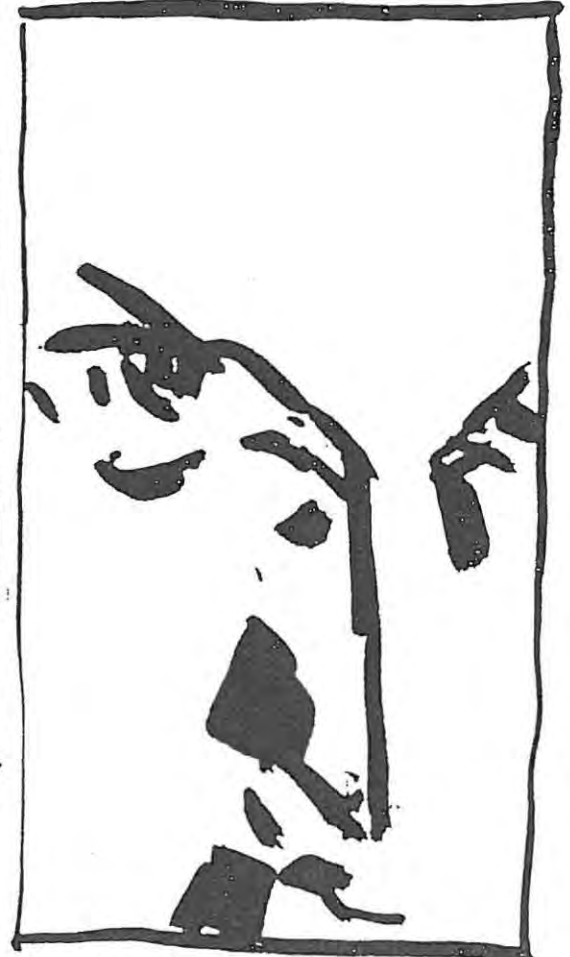
It is as if the drawings were a series of enlargements of the first, offering no additional information, just a different way to look at the same thing. Instead of making more sense through closer observation, the thing examined makes less sense. This is just the process the text describes, a progression from surety to the uncertainty of a limited viewpoint. Bitterkomix's originality lies most obviously in detail, juxtaposition and inventive plagiarism, but it is their translation of the comic idiom into Afrikaans that is most important. Instead of simply producing Afrikaans comics, they translate English-language comics culture into Afrikaans. This is no small thing. The entire content and theme of their comics is South African, even while their direct influences and inspirations are foreign: Nag van die Wit Skrik is taken from an American text, and interpreted so efficiently that no trace remains of its origins. Dog's series Myself and my Heroes lists some of his sources, revealing just how eclectic these sources are. Although most of the



... I had a neat stock
of fixed opinions,...



... but they dropped
away one by one;...



... and the further I get
the less sure I am.

stories in issue 1 are in English, the comic is as "tweetalig" as the editorial claims it is, being a combination of the local and the international.

The desire to localise international comics culture also prompted Gif [fig 55], which contains some of their most blatant perversions of traditional Afrikaans culture, presented in the format of a bland, conventional comic.

In combining these two sources, Bitterkomix are forced more and more to consider the way a comic works. Concurrent with their mastery of comic tools is an examination of them, leading to the sometimes conscious separation of the narrative and the mechanical.

Eventually, in terms of subject matter, they move from incidental detail to direct attack, in, for example, Siembamba and Jeugweerbaarheid.

BITTERKOMIX en HOND bloed

GIF

AFRIKANER SEKSKOMIX



Figure 55 Dog Cover of Gif

4. CONCLUSION

The comics are all printed in black and white; this is a choice dictated by the expense of colour printing. Only Bitterkomix have used one-colour covers.

Almost all work is pen and ink, some brush and ink featuring occasionally; Bitterkomix have experimented only briefly with charcoal and pencil. This tendency is as much for reasons of reproduction and costs as for simplicity. To choose an easily reproducible medium from the beginning (ink rather than charcoal) sidesteps some printing requirements, like bromiding. In addition, and this is a consideration for many artists restricted by a small budget, artwork and lettering will remain legible even if copied on a poor quality photocopy machine. Pen and ink is simply the most efficient and cost-effective medium to work in.

Clarity in the original drawing is also important because much of the artwork is drawn to A3 proportions, then reduced photographically to A4 sizes for printing. This is done partly because such a reduction process facilitates detailed reproductions, partly because that is simply the way "real" comics are done. Despite the artists' often self-conscious denials of aspiration to professional status, there is still a common understanding that all are working within an already established medium with clear rules and conventions. Underground comics rebel against their perceived genre, not the comic medium itself.

Reducing drawings prior to printing does take practice, and several artists have struggled with this. Although reduction improves the intricacy of a work, it can also remove some of its force. An original layout or composition will seem clear and ordered until it is reduced, when it becomes murky and cluttered. Bold lines become tentative and lettering

disappears. Judging the degree of compensation required in the original artwork is a matter of trial-and-error; some artists have simply resorted to working full-size.

In the work of Komiksoc and Bitterkomix artists, a gradual acceptance and use of classic comic conventions demonstrates increasing confidence in and understanding of the medium, through relinquishment of self-conscious mannerisms that are irrelevant to the process and hamper communication, not only of the story but of the overall vision and intent.

A common criticism of amateur comics is that the work is simply an imitation of already existing work. Although the issue of originality as an indicator of quality is a contentious one, it is possible to qualify the work of the artists under scrutiny according to this standard. Bitterkomix, the major Komiksoc contributors, and to a large extent Morai, can be said to have developed a part of their personal style before copying other more established comics. In these cases, the stylistic copyings were purely stylistic; other comics were looked at in a search for tools to improve the clarity of each artists' own work. This approach, whether conscious or not, determines that an understanding of stylistic conventions be reached before appropriation happens. In having already established some measure of individuality in their own work, however slight, the artists were concerned with building a more conventional style around this core, rather than swamping and dissolving it within a standard comic.

The advantages that Bitterkomix and Komiksoc had over Morai are that the juxtaposition of work compelled artists to experiment and improve, as well as to learn from each other's work. Morai, working in a metaphorically closed environment, continued steadily on his own development.

The most common genres (my definitions of genre are derived from existing comics, rather than from literature) are fantasy and a kind of magic realism. Bitterkomix explore this with superhero stories, which are ironic and self-conscious. Yet even the most realistic of stories are tinged by drugs or the supernatural. Sometimes this edge of fantasy is apparent only in the drawing style, in cartoonish exaggeration, in a personal style that departs from the classic comic style that is accepted as realism.

Bitterkomix's covers are formulaic, while Komiksoc, Morai and Desire's are each a different attempt. Perhaps from this evidence alone it is possible to say that Bitterkomix have achieved something (by setting flexible rules and adhering to them), Morai as well to some extent, but Komiksoc have only a series of experiments that have not yet congealed into anything.

What these comic artists achieved, in purely practical terms, was the publication of their work. They produced work independently of each other and independent of any large supporting group in their own country. There is a sense of producing work in a void, into a void, that accounts for the insular nature of much of the work. Simply for this reason it would seem plausible to align them with fine artists. Commercial art is seldom produced without a clear purpose at its origin. Undoubtedly, this vacuum gave them the opportunity to experiment in a way that is common in fine art fields and unusual in commercial ones. They had to be self-critical; commercial art does not reach the printing stage if it is not suited to its purpose. These artists had the advantage of seeing the work printed, thus removed from their hands, before serious criticism scuttled their enthusiasm.

The drift to more conventional comics was often a result of audience criticism (and particularly a plea for greater clarity). "Will they have speech bubbles in them this time?" was a despairing comment often heard from prospective readers.

The lure of comics for visual artists might be perceived as an attempt to escape the exposure of visual art by hiding behind words, a foreign element in pictures that can screen the artist by reintroducing the buffer of external content. Visual literacy requires, at least in lay readers, more apparently unconscious skills than verbal literacy, as visual literacy is not taught formally. Thus a purely visual story seems to act more directly on the understanding without rational analysis.

A possible reason for venturing into comics is that comics are a way to draw peers' interest into ones' work. Most of these artists were fine art students at universities, where peer groups consist largely of non-art students. Art students work in isolation, and their work is often separate from the rest of their daily lives; friends look at pictures or sculptures and exclaim kindly, but are not trained in the language of appreciation, and little real understanding occurs. The artists are confronted with the problem of a separation of languages. While their friends may be able to recognise "good" art, usually because they are in some degree visually and artistically literate and educated, they are seldom struck by a sense of relevance or immediacy. This is especially true of students at the beginning of their studies, where most of the work is of necessity of a training nature, being exercises in drawing and techniques. There is a need to produce something that is real to their peers; also, because students are most likely to share the values and beliefs of their peers rather than those of their teachers, there is an underlying need to produce something that is more real to themselves, and is read more directly, more instinctively by others.

Of course, these "instinctive" reactions to a work are a product of familiarity. But the students' world of reality is more media oriented than that of their teachers; especially in South Africa, with the late arrival of television, the generation of comic artists under discussion were among the first generation of South Africans to grow up with television,

the first generation whose world is more strongly influenced by commercial media than fine art or literature. Their cultural milieu is more visual than verbal - radio, newspapers, books and magazines are substantially different in texture from television, computers and videos or films. (Novels do not break for advertisements, nor does radio have trailers.)

So inevitably comic artists are faced with a problem of language. "Burning with an inferiority complex towards the 'high' culture in whose discourse they are themselves fluent, their overwheening concern is to validate pop culture." (Reynolds, 1990, p.10) Working in a medium understood by their peers, they are then confronted with the problem of integrating a fine art training and understanding into the preset rules of a commercial medium. A new language, or perhaps just a dialect, must evolve.

The more obviously poetic, less narrative stories were rejected by peers as being incomprehensible, contrived and 'arty'. To an uncertain artist or writer, contrived obscurity can seem to enhance the importance and profundity of their work.

What Bitterkomix understood from the beginning is the fine balance that must be maintained; comics are not a new medium, they have a solid history of development, and only with a thorough understanding of this can diversions then be introduced. To blatantly work within the comic medium is to accept comic conventions; rejection, if necessary, follows after that. Differences from standard comics are as important and telling and useful as any other aspect, especially as comic audiences are alert to any such deviations.

Even more than painters or writers, comic artists work with the intangible: the gap between the frames, the reality behind the drawings, the sound behind the lettering. They juggle and manipulate this unreal dimension, and that is the magic that makes one comic better than another. The comics that fail may use the same genres, tools, techniques, even be drawn better. But if the artist deals primarily with what is on the page rather than what is not, the comic disintegrates into writing and drawing, remaining static. This appreciation of the unreal dimension, the virtual reality that is derived from the work, that the work is only a diagram of, is ingrained in the fantasyland of popular culture. It is second nature for a mediawise audience to suspend disbelief, to fill in the bits, to interpret for themselves, not just in an approach to art, but in everyday communication; to read the advertisement as it is meant to be read, and then as it is not meant to be read. The popularity of David Lynch's films (a self-acknowledged influence on *Bitterkomix*) is due to this understanding: that there are always at least two levels to be apprehended, neither of which can be separated from the traditional "meaning of the text".

Lynch deals with this by injecting a familiar, ordinary surreality into his work. In film, such intentions often need to be overstated, because the pitfalls of believing what-you-see-is-real must be avoided. Comics do not have this problem. Comic frames cannot be mistaken for verbatim accounts of reality. Photostories, which one would expect to be more realistic, are less so. The intrusion of speech bubbles and captions are more strongly felt, so that the comic does not become an unreal whole reality. Photographs also in fact seem more lifeless than drawn comics because movement cannot be depicted as it can in a comic drawing.

Obviously, the reader's response is a consideration if the comic is intended for print. However personal the artist's vision, there should always be an "in" for a reader. Two

ways of creating this entrance point are used in the comics examined above. They are similar methods, utilising opposite means, and are based on a distinction between the verbal text and the artwork. Many grades of variation exist between these two poles. If the story is conventional, the artwork can be less so, and vice versa. The skill lies in maintaining a balance, and thus a mean of intelligibility. "The magic of the strip is not so much in what it says, but in how it says it." (Watterson, 1990, p.2)

Yet, however interesting and important these comics are to the people who produce them and the people who have "never seen anything like this before", they remain irrelevant to the commercial publishers of comics. For all the bluster about challenging mainstream mores and redefining categories of art, South African undergrounds are still teenage indulgences. If, in twenty years' time, one of the artists is producing graphic novels, or if the great South African comic emerges from these beginnings, other significances can be attributed, with hindsight, to these publications. The challenge to these artists is to retain a memory of their stubborn beginnings as they become more adept at producing mainstream comics. Substitute "comics" for "samplers" in the following quotation:

"So often, the cry goes up that 'everybody' is 'out there' fooling around with their cheap samplers, thus constituting a 'groundswell'; But even if they are, so what? Are the pavements cracking? Is a state of collapse imminent? Samplers will certainly not be suppressed by the music industry." (Reynolds, 1990, p. 171)

The importance, if any, of these comics lies in their possibilities. Reynolds expresses the intentions of the artists succinctly:

"With the music [or comics] we like, it doesn't matter if it doesn't

'breakthrough', if it doesn't 'happen' - because, by being created, it's happening. It's there as a choice, a reproach, and its remoteness from the secular pop world is a sign of its success." (p.107)

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